

Drum
Bits
of
Terror

Imali J. Abala

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Dedication

Dedicated to my parents whose memory I cherish

Part One

There were no drum bits of joy to mark his birth.
The sky was cloudless and a clear blue,
But the sun was bitter in its rising, red, hot, sizzling.
In the house, filled with whispers of discomfiture,
There was no jubilation when he took his first breath,
Just hushed murmurs of: 'It's a boy!'
That was all, nothing more, nothing less.
Whispers of disappointment raved the air:
If only it had been a girl, if only it had been a girl,
That would have made all the difference,
For she comes with no inheritance imposition!
As for the boy, a taboo child at best,
Carrying baggage of dishonour, who will offer him land?
He, a mere transient visitor at his motherland!

“Who is my father?” Sam asked the Old Man one afternoon as they sat under the canopy of the gum tree. His tone was very abrasive. The Old Man who was sitting in an old wicker chair shifted his weight to the left, but remained soundless

Gawking at the Old Man and assuming he had not heard him, Sam repeated his question, ignoring proper decorum of speaking to an elderly man. Not just any old man, but his grandfather. Any young man or woman would know how to address the elderly among Logooli people with respect.

“*Guga*¹, I said,” he bellowed and then paused as though he had recognized his mistake; he had not. “Who is my father? I want to know right *now*!” His abrasive tone was unchanged.

Pained, the Old Man simply stared at him. When he opened his lips to speak, he only mumbled, “I am afraid son, but I couldn’t tell you even if I wanted to?” His tone was calm and collected.

“Why not?” Sam queried angrily. The pitch of his tone was raised one notch higher than before. Startled, the Old Man regarded the young chap in silence, brushing his balding cranium with the palm of his left hand. When he finally spoke again, his voice was not only raspy, but also trembled, “Son . . . I didn’t know his name . . . I didn’t know his name.” His statement carried with it the weight of defeat. Sam did not believe him, and that was the genesis of their lifelong disagreements . . .

From the day he was born in a small pristine Mung’oma village, Sam was destined to lead a bad life. Not just a bad life, but a terribly bad life. Nothing was physically wrong with him, save for having been born out of wedlock. Coupled with that truth was the unsettling news he received the day the Old Man, now his guardian, dropped in his lap a light blue envelope edged with red and blue decorative

¹ Grandfather

rectangular boxes. As usual, he was sitting on an old wicker chair under the canopy of the towering gum tree. It was there where he sat to find peace of mind or sought refuge from the sweltering heat of the sun. With his eyes closed, and mute in his silence, he rested his head on the back of the chair. He was oblivious to the passage of time, be it hour by hour, minute by minute, or second by second, even if he knew time never stayed still for any mortal. Such was the day when the Old Man dropped the envelope in his lap, several weeks after he had accosted him. There was no name on the envelope other than a small inscription in red, which read: "The Verdict." He squint his eyes in disbelief, hoping the envelope finally held the key to the mystery of his paternity. He was quiet momentarily—his soul yearning for a clearness of heart. Then, fear settled in like lead and nearly paralyzed him. Unable to open the envelope, he watched it in silence. The Old Man watched. This went on for some time. Soon, after mustering courage, he thrust his index fingers in one of the corners of the envelope. Forcefully, he ripped it open. Inside, his eyes fell on a piece of paper. He pulled it out. The paper was greyish white, perhaps from years of exposure to smoke from a kerosene lamp. No care whatsoever seemed to have been taken to preserve the note; the importance of its content diminished by its mere physical appearance. With wobbly hands, Sam opened it. The paper had been folded twice and when examined closely, the folds made a nice impression of a cross. And there it was, the Affidavit. Frenetically, he began to read its content out loud. There was a quiver in his voice as the words fell off his lips:

I, Adika, being of a sound mind hereby do solemnly swear, before the chief of Vigulu Sub-location, that Sam, a young lad born to Kagonya is not my biological son. I hereby, therefore, renounce all my parental rights as a father to him on this day of January 4, 1954.

Signature of defendant Adika

Signature of the Chief Gimose

Signature of witness Agufwana

When he finished reading, its contents made no sense to his young mind. He was only fifteen years old and a Form One student

at a local Harambee school. Suddenly, he experienced a sense of lightness of the head. Thank God he was sitting down; otherwise, his legs would have buckled from under him. In absolute silence, he ogled the note for a long time, trying to make sense of its content. The only distinct name he recognized on it was his mother's, not the other three. Soon, he was overcome with strong emotions of anger and disgust. A hollow feeling sunk at the bottom of his stomach. His belly churned as swirling eddies of burning acid gnawed at the walls of his guts. His face flashed. His forehead perspired as a faint moustache of perspiration appeared on his upper lip. He had no presence of mind to wipe it dry. Tears mixed with thin lines of colourless mucus, at a snail's pace, began to crawl down his upper lip towards his mouth, but his now red protruding eyes continued to stare angrily at the note. With his eyes filled with the ocean, he struggled to peruse through the note again and again and again, hoping he was mistaken. He paused on each word—syllable by syllable, but he had not erred . . . the note's contents still remained alien, carrying with it a truth and finality which drives sane men mad. So, if to have been born out of wedlock was not a travesty and bad enough, it was, particularly, disconcerting to absorb the shock decreed in the signed affidavit only a couple months after his birth.

That day, Sam tried to control the raging anger in his heart, but he failed miserably. The Old Man, who had not moved from the moment he handed the lad the note, simply watched the saga quietly. Not once did Sam move his eyes away from the note. Not once did he speak to his grandfather whom he blamed for everything wrong in his life. Instead, he simply gawked at the infamous note—a wrath filling monstrous and despicable abomination. Then, like a man possessed with demonic paranoia, he moved his trembling right hand, which held the abomination, close to his face. As he looked fixedly at it, his brown eyes narrowed like those of a cat stalking a rat. Then, he gradually lowered his hand, but his face remained unfeeling. Steadily and mechanically, he began to crumple "The Affidavit" between his fingers like an indomitable man set on crushing a nonsensical bug; his eyes remained wide open and vacant. His grandfather simply watched with a detached indifference. The note

morphed into an ugly shapeless ball. Without thinking, he deliberately pried his fingers open. The ball roughly slipped through them, and fell to the ground with a soft poof sound. His narrowed and unflinching eyes, gaped at the ball as though it were Lucifer incarnate, demonic.

Suddenly, again, something jolted within him. Like a man possessed by a vile spirit, he shot-up, as though pierced in his anus with a burning splint and started stomping the ball with all his might. The Old Man continued his gaze of his grandson, his eyes following his every motion of up and down. Up and down, he jumped. Up and down, he jumped as though, all of a sudden, he had found his youthful entertainment. The Old Man sat down drained of strength, but his eyes were still fixated onto the young man. Had the ball been a living thing, he would have stamped its life out, like one blows a flame off a kerosene lamp. When he got tired, he dropped his bottom onto the chair as though nothing had transpired.

Slowly, but surely, he clasped his head between the palms of both his hands in an ultimate posture of a dejected man. His red hot eyes itched with warm and moist tears. Gradually, these tears glided down his face to his chin, formed tiny glittery beads and lingered there for a fraction of a second. Drop by drop, the tiny beads began dripping onto the ground, but Sam made no effort to wipe them off. Drop by drop, they splattered onto the grass. He watched them glide at a snail's pace down the leaf and onto the ground where they were quickly absorbed by the dry thirsty earth. Occasionally, when a cool whipping draft passed, blowing away the beads, he felt chillness to his exposed skin. Still, the Old Man watched; he squint his eyes rapidly trying to tame his own tears, but Sam did not change his posture for a very long time. Even when the Old Man walked away, he hardly noticed. Afterwards, when he had tamed the storm of his rage, he picked the flattened ball reconstituted it into its original round shape and rammed it into his shirt pocket. From that day onwards, he made a conscious choice to reject anything and everything that would remind him of his despicable lineage. He was now a child of the world. Neither here nor there . . .

That year, Sam learned that the world could be a very cold place. That it showed no mercy to those with broken hearts. He had a broken heart and was alone in his brokenness, mentally and spiritually forlorn. He also learned of man's inhumanity to man. This truth remained that foul dust that floated and persisted in his every waking moments. So, he no longer spoke to the Old Man much, convinced he had colluded with his mother to keep his father at bay. He was wrong.

The only being from whom he sought solace was his Aunt Ajema who lived faraway from Mung'oma village; she was at a Teachers Training College. Be it as it may, she could not give him a shoulder to lean on frequently and this made his case more abysmal. Yet, even she was disturbed by his aloofness. She tried to soothe him, but it was pointless; eventually, she gave-up. Although she understood his struggle and made tremendous effort to steer him on the right path, he rejected that too. In the end, she knew there was nothing she could do for him to restore his faith in humanity. And as the sage always said, 'You can take a horse to the river, but you can't force it to drink water.' Sam was that horse.

Nevertheless, Sam grew-up to be a man haunted by this sinister past, of a scarred heart, of a gnarled soul, and of a troubled mind; unless, of course, when he was sitting under the awning of the gum tree or on one of its branches. Only then, would he find solace in his aloneness . . .

Months passed. Weeks passed. Days passed. Hours passed. Minutes passed. Time moved at a steady pace, but Sam, after reading 'The Affidavit,' sought no human companion. At dawn, when the sun rose, he woke-up, ate his breakfast, walked to the gum tree, where he sat in the brown-beaten wicker chair. When the sun reached its zenith and his grandmother offered him lunch, he ate in silence. When dusk came and the sun set in the western hemisphere, he walked back into the house, ate supper in silence, and withdrew into his room. Occasionally, whenever the moon rose above the Hills, he would stand in the window gazing into the starry vault of sky. He did this for a little over six months. When it was time, he went to the

barber and shaved his head. He returned home, took a bath and put on clean clothes. And for once, after a very long time, he went and sat with his grandmother in the kitchen; it was as though nothing had ever happened. He had a pleasant conversation with her—they laughed and joked jovial. Life in the Old Man's home returned to normalcy.

Another month came and passed. Sam was not quite at peace with himself. So, it did not come by surprise when he embarked upon a quest to find his father. This came to him one afternoon as he sat on the wicker chair under the tree. The chair was old and rough; it had weathered many spells of rain and heat, but was a comfort to Sam. That day, his back was buried into the chair, but his wide-open eyes gaped into the depth of sky. On his mind, a series of questions seethed: 'Who am I? Who was my father? Was he a rich man? Or was he as poor as Umbima, the social misfit of Mung'oma Village?' He chuckled at the latter thought. Umbima was not a bad man. He had a birth defect—seven toes which were separated with a thin film like a duck's webbed feet. That is why people mischaracterized him a misfit. "What an abomination," he mumbled to himself, pushing these thoughts off his mind.

Then he pictured another image of his father: A tall handsome, dark-skinned, rotund, and bald-headed successful businessman, but not angular in his physique. A man who wore Kaunda-business suits to all his business meetings, carrying with him a black leather briefcase. No tie for him; it is too stuffy. He smiled delightfully as, in his mind's eye, the man's image crystallized. He mulled over it again and again to a cool drafting wind.

The following day, he embarked on his quest and it lasted years. He searched everywhere, from every corner of the village, every cave, every valley, and neighbouring villages. He found no one. He searched and searched till his quest became his ultimate destructive power. Whenever he heard the word 'father' muttered, he cringed. Almost every man whom he chanced to meet, he asked only one question: "Are you my father?" If he met a woman, he asked: "Do you know of my father?" Of course, these questions only prompted shockwaves of whopping laughter from those to whom he spoke.

Others heckled him, 'What a fool not to know his father!' Belittled and dejected, he wobbled along, grumbling and mumbling under his breath. Some of his muttered words were unfit to be heard by civilized people.

During the second month of his quest, he extended it beyond the borders of his village. He darted hastily, from village to village hoping to find his business-like-father—a man who would recognize him. Or at least claim that: his ears, his nose, the shape of his eyes or mouth and bore a family resemblance to his. None of that happened; instead, he received nothing more than ridicule or snare. This response heightened his negative impressions of humanity—cold and heartless. Only he was the crestfallen man, victimized by sins of fornication, and forced to wonder the universe.

By the year's end, Sam's tumult of finding his father was the hallmark to his downfall. That is, his academic downfall. He lost all interest in school. Whenever he went to his classes, he daydreamed about the kind of life he would have led with his father—a good life, of eating bread laced with blue band and orange marmalade; eating rice with beef or chicken stew, or eating chapatti and succulent curry stew, not the kind of life born of struggle. He also imagined going fishing or hunting with him like most boys. He imagined his father telling him stories of being a man. So he wasted four good years of his schooling. When his time elapsed, and he was a candidate for his Form Four exams, his brain was empty and hollow like a calabash. He was not surprised when the results came out, and he had failed miserably! He had earned a pathetic D+ grade hardly worthy of merit or mention. That was 1980, the same year of the coup d'état in Kenya.

1981. January folded. Farmers tilled the land. The rains didn't come on time. Nothing changed. February too passed. Most farmers planted their crops. March was uneventful. Sam continued to isolate himself—or rather, he hid in his favourite spot, the gum tree. He amused himself by plucking leaves off the tree, and watching its white gummy sap drip to the ground. April roared like a lion. The weather changed. Too much rain for comfort. Not much changed in Sam's life; it was empty.

Come June, Sam was pretty much a social recluse. He spent most of his time on the wicker chair under the canopy of the gum or hid under its branches. That same month, Ajema came home for a visit. Right away, she noticed the change in Sam. He did not talk very much as he used, and she could not understand him.

Then, one day, as she was walking near the tree, Ajema heard a coughing sounded. Startled, she stopped. She looked all about and around her. There was no one. Just as she was about to leave, she heard another sound, and then followed by a slight rustling of leaves above her. Slowly, she rolled her eyes up, and gazed into a maze of thick leaves. Nestled in the maze was a male figure in camouflaged attire. She took a few steps towards the bark of the tree, but her eyes remained fixated on the human form. Soon, it dawned on her that it was none other than Sam hidden among the branches. His head was safely tilted to the trunk. His knees were slightly raised up, while his feet rested firmly on one of the branches. Sam was dazed in a way she had never seen. And in her muteness, memories of Sam's childhood seethed into her present . . .

As a young boy, Sam was delightful. He was lively, energetic, and full of laughter. His face always sparkled in the hue of dawn or dusk. He liked to fight like most boys. He liked to play soccer like most boys his age, even if he did not own a real soccer ball. He took great pride in making his own. He would run to a banana plantation, strip dried banana fibers from its stalk, which he rolled into a round ball. When he was in a hurry, and he was impatient many times, he would break a corn husk, wrap it in plastic papers or banana fibers, and manipulating until it became a nice shapely ball. He would tighten the ball with sisal fibers because of their sturdiness. Happy with his creation, he would solicit playmates from the village, of whom he never lacked. He would play for hours, or until his body was exhausted. Only then would he return to the house, with his clothes all soiled and around the knee areas of his pants blotches of green and brown were visible. Aside from that, he ran around the village like most boys. He even played girlish games—hop-sotch, jump-rope, or marbles.

All along, Sam lived under the tutelage of the Old Man. The Old Man treated him like one of his own. He loved him to death. He protected him. He provided for him. He cared for him. Whenever the Old Man went about his ministry work, he never returned home empty handed. He always brought home a special treat for his grandson—a handful of *sim-sim* balls or queen cakes. Sam's favorite was the savory queen cakes; it was its sweetness he found delightful. He ate with his eyes closed, savoring its every bites, especially if he chanced to eat it with spiced tea with milk, spiced with ginger, and with a touch of sugar. When the queen cake sucked-up all his saliva, he washed it down with a mouthful gulp of tea. Then, he smacked his lips together contentedly as though he had made a major accomplishment.

The Old Man, like most grandparents, never failed to instruct Sam. He taught him good values. He modeled this way of life, demanding he live a good simple honest life, be truthful, sincere, show courage, or apply what he called the three “Ds”—Determination, Dedication, Diligence. Lying, killing, stealing, or debaucheries were some of the vices he warned him against. Indulging in alcohol consumption was a big NO. Smoking followed, among other things he despised. It was not easy to tell if Sam took him seriously or not. The Old Man despised dishonest people—they had no value to society. Thieves and liars were next on his list of the sorry lot. The worst group of people whom he found despicable was killers, or those who engaged in witchcraft. All these things, the Old Man told his favorite grandson. He also told him to dream, to dream big. He wanted him to become a successful lawyer; the first one in Mung’oma village. If not, he wanted him to become a doctor, or even the next president. Nothing was beyond reach for his grandson; he knew was destined for greatness, at least, so he thought.

But that was yesterday. Today, joy was no longer a word in Sam's vocabulary. His life was a complicated puzzle. Emptiness and the vulgar pain of emptiness, consumed him. He was angry and abrasive with everyone, for he had lost the moral compass of his life. He cared less of what people thought of him, which was a good thing, because people said horrible things about him. They were vicious rumors.

So, Ajema recollected these moments with a broken spirit as he saw Sam, a lost soul, sitting up in the tree like a mad man and, in deeds, he was mad. Sane men did not isolate themselves. Yet, Sam sat up in the tree, alone. Within no time, her thoughts were distracted by Sam's voice:

"Hush, I hear voices!" she heard him say, his eyes rolling up and down. Slowly, but surely, he moved his left hand to his left ear as though he were listening to someone, some invisible speaker.

"Look-up there! In the sky," he said almost in a whisper. Ajema's eyes followed the movement of his finger as the vastness of the sky opened before her eyes, but she saw nothing other than massive dark clouds that moved sluggishly concealing the sun, and only to re-emerge momentarily.

"Do you see *them*, the hawks?"

"Where?" Ajema said unexpectedly. She did not mean to, but the words simply sipped out of her lips. Startled, Sam dropped his eyes to the ground, noticing her for the first time. Their eyes met, but he was silent in his gazing. They regarded each other for a brief moment.

With the same abruptness he had dropped his eyes to the ground to see his intruder; he tossed his head upward, disregarding her presence. "Do you see them . . . I mean . . . the hawks?"

"Nope, I don't see them!" Ajema mumbled more to herself than Sam.

"They are free. Free to enjoy life without any care in the world. Oh! How I wish I were one of them. I would live in peace," he said with a pained sadness.

"Just look at *them*!" he said in a low crackling voice. "Do you know what they are telling me?" A hint of agitated excitement was apparent in his voice.

This confused Ajema even more. She looked at him sternly, for she had not heard anything.

"What are they telling you?"

"Hush, you are disturbing *them*. They won't speak to me if you speak."

Ajema fell silent. An ominous dead hush passed. While above them, dark clouds glided with easy concealing the sun, only to reappear in a twinkling.

When Sam broke the stillness between them, he bellowed: "Open your trumpet ears! Open them wide and you will hear. Oh, yes! I hear them again!" He moved his eyes rapidly away from Ajema and gazed into the hollow depth of sky.

"I hear you!" he said as if addressing *them*. *They* said nothing. A moment of awkward silence followed. And, in that instant, Sam was gone.

When Ajema walked away from under the tree moments later, Sam hardly noticed her absence, just as much as he had not noticed her appearance. His vacant eyes continued to gaze into the sky, way past the Milky Way. In the process, Ajema also recollected an abnormal growth that protruded on Sam's forehead, a grotesque swelling. It was not a pimple and could not have been mistaken for one. Perhaps it was a mole, which he saw as a curse from the Almighty. So he sank further and further away from humanity. Even his talk no longer made sense to those around him, except for his invisible listeners.

As she walked away, Ajema felt a twisted anger throb within her. How sad, it was to have lost an innocent young lad, the beacon of her family. She also thought about the infamous affidavit the Old Man had saved for Sam many years ago. What an indomitable monstrosity! She thought about Sam's loss of faith in humanity, certain that he did not understand that humanity was like an ocean. If a few drops of the ocean became dirty, it did not become dirty. Though, inwardly, she hoped that one day, when he attained the clarity of thought and mind, he would awaken from his stupor of madness, find himself and lead a normal simple life. And that was bound to happen, even if his quest to find his father remained unresolved.

The Old Man was a very thoughtful man. He understood the modern world, though it differed from what he knew. In his time, life was simple. Men woke-up at dawn and worked the fields from sun-up to sun-down. They provided for their families and protected them. Mothers had their place. Community cohesiveness was epicentre of life, no matter what. Life was uncomplicated.

That was not the case in the modern world. Selfishness was the norm. To get ahead, education was a key to success. The Old Man understood that truth, even though he never had any formal schooling. His father, who was suspicious of the missionaries, did not see its merit. He denied all his children an education and retarded their progress. That was 1903 when the first school was founded at Kaimosi Friends Primary. The Old Man vowed not to follow his father's footsteps; he did not. Years later, when President Moi encouraged parents to get an education under *Elimu ya Gumburu*, he was too old to reap its benefit. That was 1978; though when his children started school, he would hide behind his fence listening to youngsters sing one particular rhyme—

Nyenya kosoma, nyenya kosoma, nyenya kosoma ma nduuki Ivulaya.

*Mago vukiindu, mago vukiindu, mago vukiindu, vukiindu vwa mugamba?*²

Though he could not understand contents of the song, and it sounded foolish to his ear, he could not help, but wonder where *Ivulaya*—overseas—was located. Even before he had learned the meaning of the song, he had vowed never to deprive his children of an education; they would learn and learn, even if they reached the faraway lands. He would make sure they attained the very best education the world had to offer—and he had made good of that promise.

² I want to learn, I want to learn, I want to learn till I go overseas
How cold, how cold, how cold the morning chill is.

It was not, therefore, surprising when the Old Man broke the news to Sam, three months after he had finished school that he was sending him to a Polytechnic school.

“My child,” he had said to him one day as he sat on a wicker chair under the gum tree. “I have been thinking about your future.”

“Yes!” the boy said.

“I think it would serve you right if you went to a Polytechnic school!”

Sam, glum-faced and as though his lips had been laced with glue, sat still gazing at his grandfather.

“I have been watching you for a long time,” he added. The boy remained soundless and simply stared at the Old Man with vacant eyes. It was hard to tell if he was displeased at all with the news.

“There is nothing here for you to do now. I don’t have many cows as I used to. Besides, we live in a different world.”

The boy said nothing. Silence reigned and remained. The two simply gazed at each other.

“Your world is different from my world. Many young men your age are going to college. Those who miss admittance to the university or a teacher’s training college got to go to Polytechnic schools. That is where I want you to go. Learn a skill or a trade! It will help you in your future.” A moment of silence elapsed between them.

When he finally spoke, Sam said five simple words. “Alright Guga, I will go.” The Old Man heaved a sigh of relief. Sam swallowed tons of saliva and then added, “Where is this school?”

“Bumbe!”

“When will I go?”

“In two weeks!”

“Okay then . . . If it will please you, I will go!”

With that settled, Sam did not walk away. Instead, he sat there taciturnly, musing over his life as his mind took flight to his childhood problem: a father’s absence. He wondered if his father would have sent him away, far, far away from home. Perhaps, his grandfather wanted to get rid of him. That had to be it. He wanted to get rid of him; perhaps, he already branded him his mortal enemy.

And an enemy, often always, never keeps an adversary around. He lumped his mother in the sorry lot of his enemies—for she, like his father, had abandoned him. He also felt the Old Man, just like his mother, was a liar. In his mind's eye, both were lying bastards who could not tell a simple truth. Could Sam have been right?

He recalled the day he had confronted his mother about his father's identity. Her adamant response was, "Adika is your father . . . I have told you more than once!" Her response fell on Sam's deaf ears. Not once did he believe her story. Could she have lied about Adika? Then, there was the issue of the Affidavit. If it was true, why did the man sign it? What was the truth? It was hard to tell. In the absence of a DNA test, which could have cleared the matter once and for all, his guess was as good as anyone else. That was all there was to it. Yet, the truth was that such thinking defied logic and went counter to the Old Man's nature. For he was kind hearted, simple-minded, and pure of heart. He hated and despised liars and could not have lied to Sam.

Sam did not outright fret when the Old Man told him to join the two-year Polytechnic School in Bumbe. His grandfather knew that a diploma in masonry would sustain Sam's future livelihood. Many institutions within the community needed skilled technicians. He understood that fact. Everyone had to be self-reliant since communal living was no longer a norm . . . That neighbours no longer cared about a man, woman, or child next door. So he sent his grandson away; it was the right thing to do, making his journey inevitable.

The day before his departure, Sam remained in his room all evening. He gathered all his precious belongs and combed through them with precision. They were not many by any stretch of the imagination. He roughly stuffed them in a blue metallic trunk his grandmother bought him from Luanda Market days ago. Little thought went into this act. He had not bothered to wash his new blankets, sheets, and a towel she had also bought for him. He did try-on his flip-flops. He simply pulled them out of their plastic paper, slid his feet into them to ensure they fit, took them off, slipped them back into the plastic paper, and stashed them in the trunk next to his new towel. They had to retain their newness. That was it. They had to

be as good as new. Then, he reached for his new shoes. They were black and brand new, not *mtumba*.³ He smiled a sneaky smile. He picked one of the shoes in his left hand, moved it close to his face, his eyes glaring at it with an unsurpassed excitement. It was his first new pair of shoes ever—a brand-new pair he had ever owned. The other shoes he had ever worn were second hand. He noticed a small blotch of dirt at the very tip of the right shoe. That had to come out . . . no doubt. He did not have anything to wipe it off so he pulled the hem of his trouser and used it as a rag. He tried to scrub the dirt off, but it was as stubborn as an impish brute. Defeated, he bloated his cheeks with air, pursed his lips into a nice round shape and forced air through them. The air was warm and moist, enough to dampen the blotch. Then he pulled his hem again and in a slow and deliberate motion, he started to erase the blemish off his shoe. This time, it came off with ease. He wiped the shoe until it glistened under the hazy light of his room. He smiled contentedly in its reflection. He placed the shoe on the floor and reached out for the other one. He repeated the process as before. When he was finished, he placed both shinny shoes side by side; they glittered under the dimness light of his room. Again, he smiled a prideful smile, wondering how many other students at his new school will be lucky enough to own a brand-new pair of shoes. He was grateful the Old Man had been generous.

After he had packed everything, he stretched his back onto his bed, deep in thought. His room was quiet, peaceful and dimly lit, but his eyes were wide open as the sky. Even if a dazzling sunshine had fallen across his face, he probably would not have shut them. It was as though his eyelids could not snap shut to protect his eyes against anything. Tears of joy and sweat rolled down his cheeks and dropped into his soft pillow. Leaving home was hard. He knew that fact. Change was as good as it was bad, even that, he knew it. It was natural he would feel bad about such a transition. That he knew too. So he remained motionless on his bed for a very long time as though his body had been tethered by invisible bonds, rendered immobile by an overpowering weight. Then suddenly, as though struck by

³ Second hand.

lightning, he jumped out of bed and began to rummage through his room. Whatever he was looking for, only he and his Maker knew. On his mind, one thing was clear: *It* must have been something very important. He pulled his bedding off his bed, ransacked his mattress, but he did not see *it*. He looked under it, but it was not there either. He inspected the little carton box he had used before as his suitcase, but *it* was nowhere to be found. Exasperated, beads of sweat began to appear on his furrowed brow. He did not bother to wipe them off. He could not leave home without *it*, and that was the plain truth. He pulled his trunk out of the way and looked all around it, but there was nothing. Defeated, he stood right in the middle of his room, rubbing his left temple. He bit his lower lip with an agitated anger. He had to find *it*. Then, as though a light bulb had been suddenly ignited in his mind's eye, he remembered one more place he had not looked. It had to be the place. Yes. He remembered this box in which he had put all his books after he finished his fourth form. He had it stashed in the Old Man's storage. Without thinking, he stormed out of the room and dashed for the storage. He returned momentarily with *the* box. He emptied its content onto the floor and bending over it. He frantically rummaged through it, book after book after book. All the while, his heart raced at an alarming pace. He could feel its hard and rapid thumping against his ribcage. He had to find *it*, and if he did not, well . . . He did not know what else to do.

When his eyes finally fell upon *it*, an ugly looking ball sandwiched between books at the very right tip corner of the pile. 'There you are!' he said exuberantly. Then he sighed contently. 'You little rascal! You had me all worked out for nothing,' he added. Strangely, he did not rush to pick it. He just looked at *it* with glaring eyes. One would have expected him to pounce on *it* with joy, but he did not. He looked at *it* as though *it* was a monstrosity from hell. Memories from the past rushed back on his mind. He sighed again as he ran his leathery fingers through his coarse hair. Then, he thrust his right hand into the pile. His nervous fingers locked onto a small ugly misshaped round ball; he was nervous now as he had been several years ago. He pulled *it* out quickly and without thinking, he moved *it* close to his face. He plopped his bottom onto the hard cold floor, his eyes

glaring at *it* with the same intensity he had when the Old Man had given it to him, the Affidavit. Floodgates of anger returned to him again as though the events of that day were once more part of his present. He eyed the disfigured ball for a very long time, wondering why he had been ill-fated to have been born by two unfeeling creatures. He could not understand it. (His mother must have been consumed by the tide of new ideas—of love and shunning tradition. He was a by-product of that confusion). He put the ball by his side and started re-parking the box. When he had finished, he reached out for the ball again and stared at it for a very long time. He thought of how long the Old Man must have kept it in his possession. ‘Why had he not destroyed it?’ Would he have been better off without it? He also thought of what it represented to him—his life. He twirled it between his fingers and tossed it up high in mid-air several times. As it flew up into mid-air, he grabbed it with ease. Each time, he gazed at it, and then he would toss it up again. In the end, he mumbled, ‘No! To hell with *it*! To hell with *it*! I can’t take *it*!’ Then, after having given the matter some serious contemplation, he muttered, ‘What good will it do for me if I took it to school again?’ Without thinking, he reached out for a matchbox from his table and stormed out of his room into the open. It was already getting dark, and the air outside was pitilessly raw and cool. He placed the ball on grass and struck a match to it; it died in the drifting wind. He made a second attempt at striking the match again; it ignited. Lazy flames on its tip danced on for a moment and flickered off. When he struck his match a third time, he cupped his left hand around it and successfully set the ball on fire. He watched *it* burn until *it* turned into ashes. He watched as drifting wind carried its ashes into oblivion. What remained behind was a blotch of black. ‘Some ghosts are better left undisturbed!’ he mumbled, remembering his grandmother’s saying—*Utabeenza zingende mulwoova dave*.⁴ He returned to his room. The air inside was warm and stuffy. Walking directly to where he had left the box, he bent over it, grabbed and lifted it from the floor, tucked it underneath his armpit and marched out of his room to the storage. He deposited it there;

⁴ Why do you search for worms in a mushroom?

for the box and all its contents were a relic of a past worthy forgetting, banished from his present . . . It could not be a part of his present or new life. When he returned to his room moments later, he dropped his exhausted body onto his bed face-up and closed his eyes, but his mind was already absorbed with what lay ahead. He had no recollection of when sleep claimed him.

The next morning, Sam's departure from home, the day opened to a thunderous downpour. The sky was heavily saturated, with massive dark clouds that moved rapidly below the already gloomy horizon. They were like a thick towering cloak of darkness above Maragoli Forest. Whether the rain, or the gloominess of the morning, was a prelude to his doomed life, no one could not tell. Occasional flashing light appeared above the hills accompanied by a thunderous uproar, but Sam sat in the Old Man's living room in utmost stillness. Nothing seemed to dampen his excitement of leaving, not even a deluge could hamper his departure. Nothing rattled his sense of being. His mind was consumed by a hidden joy of leaving. Nothing could have been sweeter than evading the hawk-like clutches of the Old Man's strangle-hold against him. He would be free to do as he pleased—free in every sense of the word.

Sam waited, with eager anticipation, for the rains to subside. Although he and the Old Man were in the same room, they were worlds apart, much like strangers forced to inhabit the same space. They remained in the vulgarity of their silence for a long time. Even when Sam's grandmother brought them breakfast, a giant pot of tea with boiled bananas—a meal she knew would tame Sam's pangs of hunger until he got to school—the men ate in silence. Sam nibbled on his food like a goat, while the Old Man sipped his tea sullenly, keeping a vigilant watch of the rain as it came down hard.

After breakfast, the Old Man said, "Sam, could you call your grandmother for me?"

Sam, who had been watching the rain through the open door, rolled his eyes towards his grandfather. There was a hint of agitation in his eyes.

“Sure!” he said, stood-up, and vanished from the room. He returned moments later, and behind him, his grandmother followed. She looked worn and tired. Her grandson’s impending departure must have had a profound effect on her, even though she did not say it. She walked into the room respectfully, like a dutiful woman who knew her place in the family.

“*Mzee*,”⁵ she said. “What is it?”

She expected him to tell her he needed more food, but he did not. Instead, she watched his eyes wander off from her, to Sam, and then to the outside, through the door which was ajar. The rains had begun to subside, and the sky was clearing-up. Visible streaks of light were now evident on the eastern horizon, leaving a slight glare. Way yonder, on Maragoli Hills, he could see faint images of treetops. This was a sign that the cloak of darkened clouds above the Hills was beginning to dissipate. In front of the Old Man’s door, a grey heron was pecking the ground for worms. Immediately, she understood the implication of his calling. Sam knew his departure was now imminent. Although it was a time the couple dreaded, it did not matter much to Sam. For the couple, they hoped it would bring change to their lives. It was a time for Sam to become a man . . . a time for him to begin curving a new path for his future.

Filled with mixed emotions, the Old Man said, “Sam!” He paused, weighing his next words carefully. “As you prepare to leave this home now, your grandmother here,” he said throwing a glance at his wife of many years, whose visage was shrouded in sadness. “Your grandmother and I would like to wish you success as you embark on this new journey of your life. When you get there, work hard. Your future depends on it. This is the only chance you have to cause a positive change in your life. Remember, this is your home, and will always be.” He meant every word of it. Sam had no other home aside from his home. This would be a line Sam would remember sooner than he thought.

⁵ An endearing term for an elderly man.

“Son . . . Go there and make us proud. You hear me? Go there and make us proud!” The Old Man paused, realizing Sam was not listening.

As the Old Man spoke, Sam’s mind was at bay. He kept on thinking of his freedom. Yes, his coveted freedom. He felt like saying to him, “bla bla bla bla!” but he dared not to verbalize these thoughts.

Paying him no attention, the Old Man continued, “Your grandmother and I will come to see you soon.”

“Bla bla bla bla!” Sam thought.

“You know Bumble is very far from here, but we will try our level best to visit,” they never did.

“I guess this is goodbye,” Sam said rudely.

“This is not goodbye,” the Old Man said. “It simply means—Go in,” but before he could finish his sentence, Sam rose up from his seat as though he was about to leave, but his grandmother admonished him.

“Sam, what do you think you are doing? Sit down and listen!” The sternness of her voice was enough to make him drop his sorry ass back onto his seat. What an impudent child!

The Old Man’s intent was to tell his grandson: ‘Go in peace!’ for Logooli people never say good-bye.

Turning to her husband, Sam’s grandmother said, “Mzee, please bless our son’s journey before his departure?” Her voice was as sweet as honey, soft, and soothing. Sam looked on, but muted like a timid dog.

“Let us pray,” the Old Man said. They bowed their heads in prayer, save for Sam. He cocked his head slightly, and with one eye open, he followed the shafts of light as they seeped in through the cracks in the window.

Dear Lord! I do hereby commit Sam, your humble servant into your hands. That as he prepares to leave this home to begin a new journey of his life, be his guide in everything he does now and forever. As he commences to travel in a vehicle made by human hands, guide his driver to ensure his safety. Amen!

That day, Sam left home without hoopla. As he bade his folk good-bye, he vowed inwardly never to return—and how could he? That was a promise he could not keep.

The Old man's home was not his home. He had no ties to it, at least, so he thought. He would soon reverse this view. Their sacrifice to him and for him mounted to nothing more than a flake easily blown in swirling dust. It was meaningless. Unfortunately, Sam had disregarded everything they had ever taught him. And just as he had come to this world without any drum bits of joy, he had left his *home* without joy.

Sam did not look back when his short stumpy feet trotted the narrow footpath from the Old Man's compound. The numerous lakes and rivulets that had formed outside and along his path gave him endless delight. He played hopscotch along the way to avoid stepping in puddles of rain. He skipped over small brown winding rivers that had formed after the downpour. There was no choking lump of sadness in his throat. He did not shed a tear of sadness like most young adults leaving home for the first time did. The sun shone brightly on his face as he walked away. His biggest concern was to ensure that his new shoes did not get muddy. What a taxing endeavour! The couple watched their grandson leave home in silence until his image faded from their view . . .

The sun had already set when Sam arrived at the gates of Bumbe Polytechnic, a remote place in Port Victoria situated right at the fringe of Lake Victoria. Near the school, were minuscule islands where Kenyan traders traded with those from Uganda. His long-anticipated journey had come to an end. Now, he had a chance to start life anew . . . Do something positive in his wretched life. He was not alone. There were other young men his age on a similar mission. Like him, they all carried with them giant trunks in which all their worldly possessions were concealed.

From the gate, the school compound looked neat. The grass was well manicured. He could see three giant whitewashed dormitories to the right side of the school compound. Their windows and doors were wooden and painted Bermuda blue with classic giant locks. The classrooms were two long brick buildings to the left of the dormitories. Unlike the dormitories, the windows were made of glass to let in light. A thin band of blue was neatly etched at its edge—perhaps where pat had been put to seal the glass to its metallic frame. A long straight dirt road separated the two sections of the school compound and curved towards the left, after several meters, all the way to the centre of the compound. The road then forked, one leading to the main administration building, while the other led to the dining hall. He could tell it was a dining hall because he could see smoke oozing out of its chimney. For just a fraction of a second, he wondered if the food the cooks were preparing was better than his grandmother's cooking. He dismissed that thought almost immediately: 'Institution food is never better than even the worst cook's food on the planet . . . As long as there are no weevils in it, I'll manage,' he consoled himself. On both sides of the road, rows of flowers were planted to accentuate the compound's idyllic beauty—daisies, lilies, tulips, roses, lilacs, amaryllis, and lotus. To the south, west, and north hedges of the compound, multifaceted bougainvillea plants—red, orange, fuchsia, purple, and pink—fortified the

compound forging its strong fence. The well-trimmed hedges plus the flowers gave the compound the appearance of a Garden of Eden, where everything good and bad began. ‘What a beautiful place,’ Sam thought fondly, feeling glad the Old Man had been kind enough to finance his schooling, despite his own insolent behaviour towards him. Now, hope and opportunism consumed him. Nothing could go wrong here . . .

He walked with bravado to the main administration block with the assurance of a man who had success written all over his forehead. There were other students who had arrived before him and had formed a line in front of the bursar’s office where they had to pay their school fees before being registered. They did not go inside the building, but talked to the bursar through an open window. The boys, who were lined up like convicts awaiting sentence, walked step by step, step by step like robots all the way to the window. No sooner had each boy reached it than he fished, out of his pocket, an envelope with the desired fees. No student was admitted with half tuition. Unfortunately, some were forced to return home to get the balance.

When his turn came, Sam walked to the bursar’s window timidly and handed him his envelop. When he was finished, the bursar directed him to another station headed by a woman. There were other students ahead of him, and so he had to wait. As he waited, he watched the woman reticently; a woman whom he later learned was the school matron. She was one short stumpy mean looking lady. Not only was it hard to tell where her waistline ended, but also where the rest of her body began. She had the appearance of a round short toad. Around what would have been her waistline, she had tied her blue apron. In her pockets, numerous pens—blue, black, red, green—and some papers were stuffed. It was difficult to tell why she needed so many pens and why in multiple colours. There was hardly a smile on her almost square face. It was a blank stare that warned him to stay away. Besides her, was a boorish looking student watching her every move. When Sam’s turn came and without even

looking at him, the matron simply said in a husky voice, “Name please?”

Sam’s heart missed a beat. He was so nervous that he even forgot his own name.

“Name please!” she barked.

“Samuel Adooli.”

“Receipt please!” Sam, with fumbling fingers reached into his pocket for the receipt, which he handed to her; it was proof he had paid *all* his dues.

With her head bent in a forward stoop, she probed, “Where do you come from young man?” Sam’s lips parted slightly. He was about to say ‘Mung’oma,’ but his words were choked in his throat. Was Mung’oma his home? This was a question which had nagged him since his formative years. He was not from Mung’oma. He did not know if his father was not from Mung’oma. For Logooli people, a child belongs to his fatherland and not his motherland; Mung’oma could not be his home. ‘What if his father belonged to another village or ethnicity?’ he wondered.

“Where do you come from *young man*?” the Matron asked again, emphasizing the words ‘young man’ and slightly cocking her head and brow to steal a peek at Sam, reeling him back from the deep recess of his mind.

“Mung’oma!” he said even though he doubted it. Deep down, he knew as soon as he finished training, he would never go back there. He vowed to buy his own land, and carve his own niche in life, build a nice home for his offspring. The tragedy of his life must never be vested on his children. They will have a place to call home. That was not all, Sam had vowed, too, never to abandon his children the way his parents had abandoned him. It was his moral responsibility to be there for them.

“Open your suitcase!” the Matron commanded. Sam complied.

She unclipped a red pen from her pocket, and pushing her right hand into her pocket, she fished out a list from which she began to read. She check-marked the contents in Sam’s suitcase: Two blankets. Check mark. Two sets sheets. Check mark. A towel. Check mark. A box of Omo, *sabuni kipande*, Imperial Leather soap. Check

mark. Toothbrush. Tooth paste. Check mark. Clean underwear. Clean shirts. Some trousers. Flip flops. Shoe polish. Check mark.

Satisfied Sam had everything on her list, she assigned him to Longonot B, a dorm which would become his home away from home.

“While you are here,” she said firmly, something she probably told all new students enrolled in the school, “Be sure to be in the dorm before 9.00 p.m. The dorm prefect locks all the doors at this time! There will be severe punishment to those who do not adhere to this rule! Understood?”

Sam nodded his agreement.

“Show him to his room!” she commanded a student who was standing guard. The two boys walked away in silence.

Sam's life at Bumbé Polytechnic was not bad, hard back breaking, but not bad. He acclimated well to his new environment. The weather was no different from that in Mung'oma Village. The only adjustment he had to make was relearning the dawn raise. He had to drag himself from bed at cockcrow to get ready for school. He attended his classes regularly and had no choice in the matter, but to participate in the hard-core job-training portion of his trade. He had to learn all there was about bricklaying. He had to learn how to work with concrete. He had to learn how to mix concrete. He had to learn how to place and shape concrete. He had to learn all about how to pour footings or foundations. He had to develop a good understanding of bleed water that settles after pouring a floor and how the heavy material gradually settles, leaving a thin layer of water. He had to learn techniques on how to construct good mortar joints or how to re-point brick mortar joints. Yes! There was nothing unique about his life, but the mundane. It was a tough life in deed, of lugging bags of Bamburi cement, of hauling tons of sands on a wheelbarrow, of fetching gallons of water downstream for mixing the cement and sand. He had to get used to getting covered in concrete dust. There was no shade. There was no relief. If the wind made it down, it carried with it clouds of teeth gritting dirt that caused Sam, and the other men, cringe in agony. Though there was no way of escaping it; it either built his character or weakened his resolve.

Despite all these hardships, Sam's first year at Bumbé was incident free. He worked hard. He focused on his studies. There was nothing to distract him at all. For he understood its significance; it was his gate path to success and offered him a promise to an impeccable future. Even when some of his teachers like Judas Mukonji, his masonry teacher, made life difficult, he did not fret over it or pay him much attention. He executed Judas' demands with ease. He coveted the end, which was much sweeter than the pain or

the struggle that accompanied it. Soon, being only human, when life became extremely taxing, he found other avenues to tame the punitive nature of his struggle—he took to *changaa*,⁶ an illicit drug that lulled the minds of the most weakened souls of the world. His soul had been tempted countless times and had unwillingly yielded to the temptation. In *it*, he sought an escape from the drag of his everyday life. Somehow, he had forgotten what the Old Man had told him about alcohol many years ago. If only he had listened, if only he had not yielded to temptations, he would have saved himself more heartache, and he did have a few . . .

There was only one place in the entire Bumbe village where Sam sought refuge from his hard-back-breaking training—Louise’s Den. The villagers named it Louise’s Den after its owner, but later simply shortened it to the Den. It was a half a mile away from the Polytechnic. For men who simply wanted to abdicate their home responsibilities or escape from their daily stress, the Den was their perfect escape. There was nothing spectacular about this place; it was a small semi-permanent house, roofed with corrugated iron sheets and mud walls. Inside, its floor was cemented. The living room was a narrow, small, cosy and smoke filled area that could only accommodate no more than ten occupants at a time and gave the ambiance of a real home. There were no real windows, just one hole cut into the side of the wall. It was neither round nor square, but had wooden shutters to bar entrance to any unwanted intruders. That is why the room was slightly dim and always smoke-filled. Yet, its dimness was ideal for those who sought to remain incognito. There were only four small *jua kali* crafted wooden tables where she served her illicit drink and soup to her most faithful customers of which most were from the Polytechnic, and Sam was one of them. Though her customers were not only limited to these students, but also teachers, business men, even villagers alike paid her homage.

Louise, owner of the Den, was a robust large big-boned woman. Her facial features were hard and overpowering, while her

⁶ An illegally brewed and potent alcoholic drink.

unflinching, piercing red-hot eyes, testament of years of sitting in a smoke-filled Den and gave her the appearance of a no-nonsense woman. Her hands were large and rough like concrete walls, almost manly, but there was no mistaking her for a man. Her bust was large, as though hidden behind her dress were two giant papayas. She was known in the entire Bumbe village for her brew. For those who found comfort in her *changaa*⁷, mostly men, they claimed she had a thumb for brewing the illicit drink. Hers was pure, no additives, no residues, not like the infamous *kumi kumi*, which was known to many for its impurity, with ether added. Hers was absolutely pure, really pure. The kind that those who indulged in it would close their eyes after each sip, wait for it to glide down their throats, shake their heads after each swallow, emit a deep sighing grunt, and declare affirmatively in four simple words: ‘This stuff is good!’ Even if it baked their liver in the process, that did not matter. It was the buzz they got after each sip or drinking only one glass of it that made all the difference. Despite its illegality, those who took comfort in it found a way of making it worth the risk and avoided being caught at all cost. To conceal her misdeed, she always had a giant pot of *nyafu nyafu*⁸ percolating in her kitchen, which she served her customers upon request. The women, on the other hand, saw her as a nuisance. She was a home-wrecker, and they blamed her for most of their marital problems. They complained that their husbands spent most of their earnings at the Den, ignoring their domestic responsibilities. If they had had a choice, the women would have driven her away. Unfortunately, she was fortified by the law—not that it was legal to make an illegal brew—but because some of the men who indulged in her brew were the law . . .

When he was not hauling sand or wheeling bags of Bamburi cement, Sam escaped into *changaa*. It had tamed his heart, mind and soul, much like it had many other men. It became the elixir of his life.

⁷ An illegally brewed and potent alcoholic drink.

⁸ A type of soup which consists of an assortment of meat—a cow’s tongue, bones, the head—and vegetables.

It numbed his sore back, lulled him to sleep, and reminded him that tomorrow would usher in a coveted new dawn. Only that dusk arrived to him sooner than his anticipated dawn. That was the night he met a young woman named Jane Nasike, the most beautiful woman in Bumbe village.

On the night their paths crossed, Sam had gone to the Den to get his usual quick fix. Judas had worked him like a donkey the entire day, and it was only fitting he would opt to have a drink before he retired for the night. On that particular night, the air was calm, warm and peaceful; it made a big difference from how his day had been. So upon his arrival at the Den, he decided to have a bowl of *nyafu nyafu* before he took his first drink. He followed an age-old rule about drinking. One that he broke many times: always load up on food before filling up on alcohol. He knew drinking on an empty stomach might lead him to become intoxicated quicker than if he ate a little. The truth about the matter was that food simply slowed the rate of intoxication. It did not prevent one from becoming drunk. Sam did not feel like getting drunk that evening because it was a week night, and he had a lot of work the next day. He knew he had to work with his masonry teacher Judas, who had no patience with slothfulness and was a slave driver at best.

No sooner had Sam finished his soup than he ordered a glass of *changa* or *kichemsha ubongo* as he called it. As he was about to take his first sip, a dazzling young woman appeared at the entrance. With a delicate tap, she pushed the door wide open, revealing the imperceptibly dark outside. She walked into the Den before Louise had a chance to welcome her in, as a cool born wind drifted. The woman was a beauty and had this radiant smile that churned men's hearts. Immediately, Sam was charmed.

The moment she walked in, it was obvious the two women were already acquainted.

"Hello Nekesa!" Louise said walking to her in a tone that signified their familiarity. They shook hands.

"Hello to you too!" Nekesa said jovially.

"Long time no see," Louise said playfully.

"Well, life has been rough these past few months."

“That is why I haven’t seen you here in a while.”

“Yes!”

“Why don’t you sit here so you can tell me all about it?”

“Not here . . . I mean, not now,” she said, noticing Sam for the first time.

Sam was holding a *changaa* glass in his right getting ready to take a sip.

‘What a beautiful woman,’ he thought.

Nekesa was a slender-bodied woman with curves in all the right places; it was of an hourglass shape, a full bust and a firm round and elaborate posterior. Her ebony skin was smooth and shone in the dimly lit Den. Her smile exposed her teeth that were as gleam as milk, the kind of smile that twirled men’s hearts. Her hair, like her complexion, was black and braided into three symmetrical cornrows that looked like three parallel roads that ran from her forehead down her nape and vowed never to meet, a typical African beauty. Her hair style was the most natural and exposed her impeccable facial features. She was wearing a brightly floral *kitenge*⁹ which hugged her body perfectly. Her dress was so bright that it could easily hurt one’s eyes.

“Have you two met?” Louise asked.

“No!” the two said in unison as though on cue.

“I am sorry. I thought you knew each other.” Sam who by then was taking another sip of his drink cocked his head, as his eyes came in direct contact with Nekesa’s. He smiled revealing two dimples that made him charming and irresistible.

“This here is Sam, a student at Bumbe Polytechnic!” She paused. “And Sam, this young woman is Lillian Nekesa. She comes here every so often.”

“It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance!” Nekesa said, extending her hand to Sam for a handshake. “But *you* can call me Nekesa,” she said with a wink her in eyes.

“The pleasure is all mine Lady Nekesa,” Sam said delightedly as he extended his own hand to clasp his fingers around hers. Her hand was warm and velvet soft as though the young woman has never

⁹ A multicolored cotton dress with African prints.

touched any hard thing in her life. He smiled. Compared to hers, his was as hard and rough as dry cowhide.

“What are you studying at the Polytechnic?”

“Masonry!”

“I see. And what exactly does a mason do?” she said naively.

“Oh, well! We build homes and other construction work that involve bricks and stones.” Then, on second thought, he added, “Okay enough about me. Can I interest you in a drink,” Sam said without even thinking. Nekesa hesitated for a minute feeling wheezy inside; after all, she did not know the man and felt uncomfortable accepting a drink from a stranger. She rolled her eyes away from Sam to Louise for assurance. She shrugged her shoulders.

“Sure, just a small glass.”

“Louise, get the young lady a glass will you?”

“No problem Sam,” she said.

She vanished into the back room and re-emerged with a glass of her best brew.

“My! My! Where have you been hiding all these months,” Sam said, smiling half-heartedly. “In fact,” he added, “I was beginning to wonder if there were any beautiful girls in Bumbe.”

“Oh really!”

“Really! I have been here for nearly two years, and I was almost convinced that the beautiful Bumbe girls are not yet been born.”

“You must be joking.”

“No. Now, you’ve just changed my mind. There are *beautiful* women in Bumbe,” he said winking his left eye. Without thinking, Nekesa broke into a hearty laughter. ‘What a beautiful girl!’ Sam thought.

“You have such a beautiful smile,” he said in a flattery voice.

“Thank you,” she said.

This was how Sam and Nekesa became friends. Their conversation went on for a couple of hours. In the end, Sam left so as not to be in violation of his dorm curfew, but promised to see her again. Later, they became more than friends. She smothered him with love. She gave him affection, something he had never experienced his entire life, and he latched onto it like a tick on a cow’s udders. He, in

return, reciprocated with his undying love for her. And as sweet as their friendship was, it was not long lived. It was a relationship which altered his life permanently!

One night, after working the whole day, Sam returned to his room completely worn-out. He did not have the strength to visit the Den. Instead, he took a quick bath, went to the dining hall and ate his supper hurriedly. He returned to his room before sun down, locked his door, shut the windows, turned off the lights, and walked all the way to his bed. He kicked shoes off his feet and dropped his body onto his bed like a log. He did so without pulling his sheets out. He heaved his feet-up, stretched across the bed, and simply lay there face-up. He closed his eyes as his mind took flight to the night before his departure from his small idyllic home of Mung'oma.

That night, he had one simple plan on his mind: to attend Bumble Polytechnic, complete his diploma, and find a job in Kakamega town. This was not too far from his grandparents' home, though this did not make much difference. If he earned enough money, he hoped to purchase land, build a home, get married and bear lots of children. He desired a family more than life itself. That was his aim, a noble goal many young men his age desired and hoped to fulfil. It galvanized his resolve. He had no father and, as for his mother, as long as he could remember, was as absent as even when present. She had no hand in his upbringing and upkeep. She was dead to him. Worst still, he never addressed her as mother, but by her maiden name, Kangonya.

So, as he rested on his bed, his mind took flight to an incident that happened many years ago. He was primary schools. Ah! How foolish he was. He chuckled a little at its remembrance. Before that day, he knew his grandparents were his parents. He even called them Mama and Baba respectively. That was until one fateful day, when he had got into a scuffle with another boy. He called him a bastard after a stupid misunderstanding. The boys were competing for a girl. She was not particularly beautiful, but that was hardly the point. Ndooli, the boy with whom he fought, had a sweet tongue. Everyone in the

school knew it. He knew it. The girls knew it. He could seduce and win a girl's heart with just a wink of his eyes. After gaining her trust, he discarded her, as though she were rubbish and devoid of feelings. Sam hated the way he treated women. He felt women were delicate, a precious and had to be handled gently. He wanted to protect the girl whom he and Ndooli coveted. Even if she was not attractive, she had a pure and clean heart. She did not speak ill of other people, even if they were unkind to her. She was ever so kind! That is why she deserved protection. The only physical and attractive aspect of this girl was the gap in her teeth. Whenever she smiled, most boys were drawn to her. That is how Sam became attracted to her. Little did he know the effect she would have on his adult life!

Before Sam made his intentions to the girl known, Ndooli interfered. He appeared on the scene with his usual wink and a smile. Boy was he a smooth talker. The girl, just in a fraction of a second, felt reeled into Ndooli's charm. He promised to give her little trinkets to clench his win and as a testament to his love for her. That should have been enough, but he did not stop there. He wanted to make sure his conquest was guaranteed. That was when he called him a bastard. Those fateful words altered Sam's life permanently.

"Forget guys like Sam! What can he give you," Ndooli said, trying to entice the girl. "After all, he is a bastard. He can't even buy you BIG G! Imagine that, he can't buy you a freaking BIG G," he added with a triumphant smile plastered across his face.

What an awful word, a bastard! Immediately, Sam's mind froze. Then, fury, real fury, an astronomical rage ambushed him.

"Take back what you've just said," Sam barked.

"No!"

"I mean *it* . . ."

"No!"

"Take it back! Or else . . ."

"Or else what!"

"Or else you will regret you ever said what you just did," Sam said fuming. By then, he even forgot all about the girl. Not knowing what to do, the girl just stood there with aghast eyes, watching the unexpected drama unfold.

“You lying scoundrel! You stupid, lying scoundrel!” Sam added.

“You can’t tell me you don’t know you are a bastard!” Ndooli said, knowing he had won the fight, though it was a cheap win. Girls do not like poor men, and he knew it. It was not because of his charm he had become triumphant, but the venom of his tongue.

“If you do not believe me, ask your Old Man,” Ndooli added with a smirk on his face, rubbing it into a wound that was already lacerated with a lot of hurt. He was right! Sam did not know the Old Man was not his *real* father, though he had raised him as his own. He confirmed this *truth* sooner than he had anticipated.

Enraged, Sam lashed out at Ndooli, his cheeks puffing in and out like a lizard, hoping to erase the smirk off his face. Ndooli ducked. Sam’s lash missed its target. He tripped and fell to the ground with a loud awful thud. His head slammed on a sharp pebble on the ground, which punctured his chin. The girl, who watched the fight from a distance, sprinted towards Sam. His head was stooped to the ground. There was a gash of blood from his wound.

“Are you alright,” she said timidly her eyes tearing-up.

“I will be okay,” he said, though those present would have begged to differ. He wiped the blood off his chin with his left hand.

“Let me help you up,” the girl said, offering him her hand. Sam cocked his head up, his eyes still blazing with a maddening rage as he ogled Ndooli from head to toe. He did not want to concede defeat. He was still determined to fight for his honour.

Sensing Sam had acquired moral victory over him, Ndooli mumbled “You can have her! She is not worth the fight. There are more fish in the sea,” he said, walking away. He did not look back.

Sam clasped onto the young lady’s hand as he staggered up. “Thank you!” he said.

When Sam returned home after the fight, he did not speak to anyone. He marched to the water tank and gently washed the dry blood off his face. Then, he walked into the house, took the Old Man’s old blue SANYO radio and walked to his usual place, under the canopy of the gum tree. He switched on the radio and turned its dial up high. It was loud enough that almost anyone in the compound

could hear it—be it music or news. He lowered his back onto the hard cold back of the chair; his mind was everywhere and nowhere. Face-up, his eyes ogled into the depth of sky. The sky was hazy and cloudy, but there was a slight cool breeze. There, he remained motionless as he began to reflect on his day's events. He had the appearance of a man whose entire world had collapsed and everything around him meaningless. On the radio, the Kenya national anthem had just ended and the voice of an announcer had come on. The tone to his voice was sombre. Broken news of the day sounded: "*Tunasikitika kutangaza kwamba Rais Mzee Jomo Kenyatta ameaga dunia akiwa ikulu ya Mombasa.*" The news reverberated the sound waves, filling the air with a sombre mood. But Sam was oblivious to it. Above the sky, massive clouds moving sluggishly covered the sun from view. Darkness fell over the land. Sam, whose thoughts weighted him heavily, was resting and muted to everything. His thoughts were thwarted by the revelation of his new identity . . . He was a bastard. He did not hear the news over the radio. No, he did not understand the news over the radio, for it held no significance or relevancy to his life. The loss of his identity was more poignant than a mere death of a man credited as the Father of the nation, a man whose death was a natural occurrence all mortals must experience at some point in a lifetime.

Everyone in the Old Man's compound heard the news except Sam. Each man, each woman, and each child dropped everything he or she was doing and dashed to where Sam was '*listening*' to the radio hoping to confirm the news.

The Old Man was the first to arrive, followed by his wife and his hired hand, the man who helped the Old Man with his farm animals.

"Sam!" the Old Man said, but Sam did not respond. Instead, he rolled his head to face the Old Man. Sam's eyes were both glossy, as though there was no life left in them. He mumbled something the Old Man could barely hear.

"What was it that the announcer just said?" the Old Man asked.

Sam could not answer, for he had not heard the news. The Old Man moved his eyes away from Sam to the radio, and before he could repeat his question, a song came on. They all fell silent.

Natazama kilele cha mlima wa Kenya

Naona maajabu ya wingu jeusi

Sio wingu la mvua

(Hakika)

Bali ni la msiba

Taa yetu ya Kenya

(Kenyatta)

Sasa amepumzika.

The radio played this song repeatedly. The lyrics to which were clear, and the news that President Kenyatta was dead was also self-explanatory. There was no mistaking the message from the song as it continued on, *Na yale macho yake makali kama samba . . .* Immediately, the Old Man dazed nearly collapsed. The energy in his feet waned off causing him to fall. He grabbed onto the bark of the gum tree with all his might for support. Then gently, he slid down until his bottom touched the ground. He stretched his legs before him, burying his back against the bark of the tree. The soles to his feet were caked in mud, and his heels were cracked like the earth during the dry season. He emitted a deep sigh, for he understood the gravity of the news; that the country could descent into chaos without notice. He knew and understood that possibility. People could die as a result. Unlike the Old Man, Sam had no presence of mind to think about such trivialities. Even the boldness of the lyrics could not reel him back to his pulsing present; it was August 22, 1978. That same year, many parents named their children *Hayati*, because most of them thought *Hayati* was the late president's name. As for Sam, it was that same year when he began his futile quest to find his illusive father. Sam closed this past as he began, yet again to think about Nekesa.

So for a long time, before Sam met Nekesa, he was all alone. He had no soul to depend on; at least, that was how he convinced himself. She became his companion in a most natural and usual way. He fell for her. She reciprocated his affection. That feeling in itself was good. It made his mind buzz with excitement. He had never experienced it before. How could he have? He was so consumed with the anger of his abandonment to realize any true feelings of love.

Now that he had found it, it felt mighty good, and he was destined to latch onto it no matter what.

One day, after several months had elapsed after their initial meeting, Sam said to her:

“You know I love you very much!”

“Yes, I do!”

“And do you love me?”

“What a silly question for you to ask!”

“I just wanted to know. Do you?” he said delicately.

“If I didn’t would I have been here with you, would I?”

Sam smiled, though all he wanted was a simple answer of either ‘Yes’ or ‘No,’ which he did not get. He did not think much about it.

“I should take you to meet my grandparents!” he said casually.

“What makes you think they will like me?” she said beaming with excitement and flattered that Sam wanted to take her to his folks.

“If I like you, I have no doubt they, too, will.”

“How so?”

“Because you are kind. You are sweet. You are charming. What is there not to like about you? What human being won’t find you attractive?”

“But you don’t even know my parents!” she protested.

“You could introduce me to them. And if they are half as nice as you are, I *know* I will like them,” Sam paused. He scratched his itchy scalp. “Do you think they would let you marry someone like me? Someone from so far away from your home?”

“I don’t know. That thought had not entered my mind!”

“Would you marry me if I asked you?” Nekesa did not answer.

A befuddled Sam had not anticipated such a response. Was he rushing things?

He did not say anything for a while. Neither did she. As silence grew between them, Sam remembered a silly story the Old Man had told him when he was still very young. It had everything to do with the conflict between Logooli and Bukusu people. ‘*Long time ago,*’ the Old Man said. *Logooli people, under the guidance of Europeans, forced Bukususes to learn Lloogoli language. They even forced them to read the Bible in*

Lloogoli. Because of that, Bukusu people developed hatred towards Avalogooli. This was during the colonial times. Those tensions still exist to this day.'

'Was the Old Man was right?' He pushed these thoughts off his mind wondering if Nekesa might object to marrying him because of his ethnicity.

"Would your parents allow you to marry me?" he asked again.

"I hardly know you!" she said finally, even if she wanted to say, 'Yes. I will marry you! Take me home with you.' Unfortunately, she could not reveal her hidden joy. She loved him, and she knew it. He, too, knew it. Even those who knew them knew it too. What would Sam think of her if she accepted his proposal on the spot? 'He will think am a loose girl,' she thought, but she was wrong. Sam could never have found fault in her.

Hearing her response, Sam experienced a hollow feeling in the pit of his stomach. A silent revolt erupted on his mind. He wanted to scream, 'Lady, what is there to know? This is all I am; I am who I am! No surprises! No tricks!' But he could not lose control over his temper, even if he felt a twisted anger like a winding sheet knot his guts. No. He had to be calm and collected. Feelings of rejection flashed through his mind repeatedly, of his 'father's rejection of him, of his mother's rejection of him.

"I am very flattered you want to marry me. Let me think about it first until tomorrow. As Mama always says, 'When someone asks you a question, it means the person has taken time to think about it a great deal. Let me consider your proposal. Let it percolate on my mind, and I promise to give you a response tomorrow.'" She did not smile. She did not even have a fake grin on her face. She said it with all seriousness.

"What is there to think about?" Sam said frustrated. Her barbed words had penetrated deep into his heart.

"It is a big commitment. One has to think about these things; you know!" she said with buoyancy.

"Alright then! You think about it and then let me know. I will be waiting."

After that brief conversation, Sam's optimism of marrying Nekesa became shaken. She had not rejected him, but she had not

accepted his proposal either. He did not know what to do or say. He had only one solution: patience and patience were all he had left. Later that night, he thought about her response over and over again. *'Let me think about it first until tomorrow.'* He resolved to wait. *'Okay, I'll wait until tomorrow, and the day-after tomorrow, and the day after that.'*

The possibility of their 'commitment' to each was still as good then as it was yesterday. It will be the same tomorrow and the day-after tomorrow. Little did he know the folly in men; that human beings were like a flower in the open. Any wind can blow them away.

That night, Sam's mind was at bay. Because of his love for Nekesa, he could not fathom spending the rest of his life alone, without her. So he dreamed of that day, the day of their wedding, of a hidden joy of marital bliss. As soon as he finished his diploma, he would marry her. It was resolved, and that was all there was to it, nothing less. He was certain the Old Man would approve. So, he dreamed of a lavish wedding party organized in his honour—a slaughtered cow to mark the occasion, uncountable hens, platters of bread with butter and orange marmalade. Platters of roasted groundnuts and *Sim-Sim*. Mountain and mountains of crates of sodas—Fanta, Coca-Cola, Bitter Lemon, Sprint. Yes! His wedding will be the biggest in the entire Mung'oma Village. Magnificent. Perfect. Dynamite. It will be the talk of the village and of all the neighbouring villages, his deserved graduation present. Yes, in only two more months, after his graduation from his program, he will be a married man. He will have his own family. And, no doubt, a place to call home.

He pushed these thoughts off his mind as he imagined the surprise look on the Old Man's face when he introduced his fiancé to him:

"Guga, I would like you to meet my lovely wife, Lillian Nekesa. No," he said self-correcting. He had not yet married her. It was premature for him to refer to her as his wife. *"Here is a woman I would like to spend the rest of my life with, Lillian Nekesa!"* She is from Chwele Village. I met her while I was at the Bumbe Polytechnic. Yes. He liked the sound of that. He imagined the jovial smile on his grandfather's face.

"You did it son! You really did it. What a beautiful young woman."

"I know grandpa! She is stunning, absolutely stunning, isn't she?"

"Do you think grandma will like her?"

"Can she cook?"

"I hope so!"

"Have you tested her food?"

"No, but I know she knows how to cook. She always says she is a good cook."

"In that case, she will not just like her, she will love her. No, she will adore her."

"You are not kidding Guga, or are you?"

"If you like her and she makes you happy, your grandmother will definitely like her too."

Deep down in his heart, Sam knew his grandmother's acceptance of his future wife would be monumental. She was more of a mother to him than a grandmother. He believed that if his bride won her approval, he would be guaranteed happiness, or at least, so he thought.

Sam replayed this conversation in his mind repeatedly, for his feelings for Nekesa were pure, as pure as they could be, and as pure as a man's feelings can be for a woman. He fell asleep to these thoughts, but all that changed sooner than he knew.

Two days after his proposal to Nekesa, Sam went to the Den. It was a dreary dusk and the wide sky above was covered with dark clouds. Where the sun dipped in the western hemisphere, a tiny rainbow formed its ark. That evening, Sam dashed to the Den for his regular fill of *changaa*. The first drop of rain had not fallen, but there were many colours on the horizon where the sun took its dive: an orange hue, yellow, and blue, of all the different colours of the rainbow struggled to penetrate an almost dark sky. The land was still and strong. Although it was a beautiful evening, the heavenly bowels threatened to explode by the minute. To avoid being caught in the storm, he ran to the Den. As he ran, the clouds above followed. Faster and faster, he ran as the iron wind, with a vengeance, slapped him across his bare skin. The trees trembled in its whipping, but he ran like a mad man driven by an insatiable desire for something. Suddenly, the heavenly bowels opened-up. There was nothing he could do, for the rainbow had failed him. Braving the weather, he pressed on towards the Den. Strong winds brushed violently against his forehead. He struggled to see amid the rain and the wind. That did not bother him. He coveted the reward at the end of his run, of a warm giant bowl of Louise's *nyafu nyafu*. He could almost taste its savoury curry flavours, of the tenderly cooked giant pieces of meat submerged in a thick coconut, and tomato base soup. Aah aah aah, delicious! After quieting the pangs of his hunger, he would quench his parched throat with a glass of *changaa*. As he drew close to the Den, he sprinted for the door, as though he was an uncontested marathon racer. Almost running out of breath, he bumped against the door and nearly tripped. It flew open like a leaf, startling those inside. Louise was in the middle of the room attending to one of her customers. He was completely drenched.

Upon seeing him, Louise jumped frightfully. "Oh dear!" she gasped, as in Sam stumbled.

"Sam! You are here," she said concealing her surprise.

Sam did not hear her. Right away, Louise knew there was going to be trouble. She did not know how she would quell the storm once it erupted. Outside, angry winds brazenly and violently swayed tree branches. The door, which Sam left ajar, banged forcefully, startling the two lovers in the room.

No sooner had he stepped into the Den than Sam smelt the savoury flavours of Louise's cooking. He did not bother to sit down before placing his order. He simply dashed to her. And just as he was about to make his request, his eyes caught sight of her, Nekesa, *his* woman. Yes, he noticed her, beautiful as ever. She was not alone, but in the arms of another man. Surprised, he stopped in his tracks, and his heart raced. The couple was sipping a drink and were oblivious to everything around and about them. Not even the storm outside rattled them. The lovers spoke in whispers, as though the meaning of their shared conversation was extraordinary and infallible.

Now and then, the man laughed, and each time, his laughter carried with it a high scale of betrayal. Nekesa laughed too, as her fingers twirled her braids playfully. Not only that, but her eyes, blazed with a familiar lustful gaze. Sam imagined her body burning lasciviously for the man. Similarly, the man's eyes blazed lustfully. Sam could not believe nor understand it. A twisted anger cropped in his throat. For a second, he wondered if his eyes were deceiving him; that the woman before him was not Nekesa. He was wrong. He squint his eyes several times, trying to acclimate them to the dull Den light. He rubbed them once or twice; all the while, he maintained his gaze at the lovers.

Filled with shock and anguish, the pangs of his hunger vanished completely. He could barely express his rage. How could he? There she was, his lover, as beautiful as ever, sitting with another man. Then, his mind flashed to the night he had proposed to her. Nekesa was looking into his eyes, as though she was trying to understand his inner soul. That night, in the bright streak of lighting, he thought he had understood her innermost feelings. Only this time, she was now gazing into her *new* lover's eyes, the same way she had looked into his eyes three days. What they said to each other was strange and infallible. It was their private conversation. Even her facial

expressions and physical demeanour, almost sense of longing to be held, was not meant for him. Even though he was not married to her, or even though she had not accepted his proposal, Sam felt cuckold. And that was painful.

Suddenly, a twisted anger ambushed him once again. He wanted to run to the couple, grab them, and bang their heads together. There was no other reaction to such a vile act of betrayal, but common sense restrained him. In all this, not once did he pay attention to the man with whom she was drinking.

The man's furrowed forehead and his old tired face spoke more to his age than anything else. He was not an exquisite dresser. He was wearing a faded grey suit and underneath it, he had on a white shirt. The coat was old and revealed signs of wear and tear, with a thin band of sweat around it. It was hard to judge the man's height in his sitting position, but he was large and his long goatee could not go unnoticed. He did not appear as loving and kind as Sam. He spoke in a gruff voice and was probably twice Nekesa's age. Could he have been genuinely in love with her? His eyes were red hot, as though he had spent his entire day-and-night swimming in Louise's *changaa*. He, as sly as a fox, was looking into her eyes lustfully as though she were a tramp. If she were a tramp, Sam had no privy to that background. He was holding and toying with one of her hands and she, in response, was all giggles. The pair did not notice Sam's entrance.

"Nekesa!" Sam said in a harsh raspy voice. "What the hell are you doing?"

Nekesa turned. She lifted her lashes and raised her eyes at the sound of Sam's voice. Surprised, she pulled her hand away from her partner.

"What are you doing here?" she said, not knowing what else to say.

"What kind of question is that?" Sam said in a gruff fuming voice.

"This is not what you think!" she said.

"If it smells like a rat, looks like a rat, it has to be a rat!"

"No . . . Really! It is not what you think."

"Don't give me that crap! I get it now . . . I get it now!"

“What the hell are you talking about?” but Sam did not hear her.

“What do you mean it is not what I think? Don’t tell me what to think! I know what I am seeing. I am not blind, you know!” He could not complete his sentence. Unfortunately, he was so wrath filled to recognize the man with whom he was sharing his girl.

When the moment of recognition dawned, he gasped: “So it is you Mr. Judas fooling around with my girl; you of all people!”

There was a deafening silence.

“You should be ashamed of yourself, running after young girls like Nekesa while your wife and children are at home. You good-for-nothing piece of shit! I ought to smack you right now,” Sam said foaming at his mouth and folding his right hand into a nice tight fist.

“I didn’t think she was taken,” Judas said in a snippy and boisterous tone. “After all, I don’t see a ring on her finger.”

Judas could not have predicted what followed. With a swerve to his right, Sam slugged him hard across his face that his knuckles cracked. He opened his fist and fanned his hand. Judas tumbled down smacking his head on one of the tables. Saliva flew out of his mouth as he went down. Befuddled, the women started screaming, but their screams were muffled by the ruckus in the room, the storm, and the loud sounds of the wind as it swayed the trees outside the Den.

Bending over Judas, Sam smacked him at the back of his head. The man’s head lurched forward. He grunted. “Why did you do that for?” the man said gritting his teeth angrily. The man pushed his massive body up forcing himself to raise-up in a protective position with his hands folded before his face to minimize any further bodily harm.

Sam shoved him forward. Nekesa screamed, “Don’t kill him please!” Sam was not listening. He was not the kind of man to leave a man half-beaten; or, at least, until he knew he was the winner. None of the men were listening. Before Judas could stand firm on his legs, Sam shoved him. The man tumbled backwards, but not before he had latched onto Sam’s shirt ripping off its buttons. He did not fall down. He steadied himself and raised his body in an erect position,

facing Sam. Eye to eye, the two men looked at each other like two bulls defending their territory.

Filled with fury, the man picked Sam up like a leaf and threw him away, the way a child throws an old toy over a new one. Sam's body landed on the floor emitting a puff-like sound. The man, being slow in his reaction, gave Sam a chance to bounce back onto his feet in a twinkling. Enraged, Sam grabbed the man's drink and threw it at him. The glass bounced off the table onto the floor. Shattered glass punctured the man's left foot. He let out a painful grunt. Seeing a window of opportunity, Sam, like a wild cat, pounced on the man who was now tending to his injured foot. He slammed his shoulder into the man like a rugby player. The man went down a second time. Sam let out a grin, but honestly, it was a smile of relief. The man looking at Sam angrily raised his right hand and pointedly said, "You will be sorry for this! Mark my words! You will be damn sorry you dared to strike me!"

In retaliation, Sam kicked him in the groin saying, "Shut-up you filthy scoundrel!"

The man experienced a stinging pain. He wanted to scream, but could not; instead, he folded his body into a round ball. Vindicated, Sam stormed out of the Den to the wailing of the women into the storm's kind violence. The swollen cloud above, thick and dark ached—her charge and agony condensed to whip the cuckold lover, as his wild heart throbbed with rage. He did not look back. He did not even feel the pin-like poke of the stabbing rain as he made his way back to the dorm. The rain beat down him hard. Thunder crashed and occasional flashes of lightning lit up the sky, but he continued running. Whistling wind swayed his shirt, but he did not have the presence of mind to latch onto its tips to cover his exposed chest. He just ran like a somnambulist in the middle of night. Occasionally, he wiped the rains off his face to see and then pressed forward. When he finally arrived in the dorm, he was completely drenched, worn, and flustered.

That night, Sam did not sleep well, as the rains of despair continued to pound hard on the corrugated rooftop of his dormitory. He did not study. And, for once, his day and his smothering dreams

were at a crossroad. He did not speak to anyone. He did not hear anyone. He did not look at anyone. He simply deposited his worn body onto his bed like a log and buried it under his sheets. The sheets were cold and uninviting. He felt no comfort. Suddenly, he remembered he had not had any food. He could now feel the rumbling of his stomach, but fought hard to ignore it. Face-up, he ogled into the darkened ceiling. The lights were out. Even had they been on, he could not have noticed a thing. Eventually, he closed them as a twist anger of rejection gnawed at his gut. Then, his mind wandered off . . .

That night, Sam's mind replayed his entire day's events again and again and again. 'What a night!' he mumbled. He bit his lower lip as a nagging image of Nekesa formed on his mind. He remembered her ebony skin. He remembered her sweet charming smile. He remembered how her smile exposed her teeth that were as gleam as milk. He remembered how her smile had twirled his heart. Then, he remembered how he had found her in the arms of Judas, an old haggard man. He recollected how Judas' scraggly hands gently caressing hers. He recollected how her seductive eyes gawked into Judas' lustful gaze. That image of her filled him with disgust and contempt; he raised his head and spat noisily on the floor. He rolled on his bed, 'Son of a bitch!' he cursed as feelings of distaste continued to haunt him. 'How foolish I was to think she loved me,' he thought. 'How foolish I was!' But had he *really* been foolish, or had she been smart enough to cuckold him? How had he allowed his emotions to override his rational sensibilities? Suddenly, he wished he had a drink of Louise's *changaa*. That would have made all the difference. It would have numbed him, lulled his senses and, most of all, sent him to sleep. Instead, an image of his grandfather flashed his mind. Yeah! He remembered him. He was thin, angular, grimacing and smiling. His bright eyes were ever restless beneath his eyelids and blinked continuously whenever he got excited. The kind loving Old Man, one who had given him a sense of normalcy in his life. Although he had thought ill of him for a very long time, he was

angelic in lieu of his quandary. He remembered the Old Man's parting words "*Son go there and make us proud!*"

'What a joker!' he thought.

Sam must have stayed up for a very long time. Probably, an hour or two, longer than his usual bed time. He was not physically tired, but annoyed. There was a lot to be annoyed about—he had lost his temper and slugged his teacher. What for, but a damn woman! He forgot that life is a game, just like the Old Man always told him. Unfortunately, the Old Man forgot one simple thing: He did not teach him how to tame his anger, and his anger had become his undoing. The Old Man also mentioned to him something about playing the game according to the rules—"You don't want to find yourself on the other side, the wrong side of the game. If you know what I mean!"—Sam was on the wrong side of the game. He had *definitely* missed the lesson and now had to face the consequences of beating his teacher. And for once in his life, he felt like praying, just a brief prayer. Ask for Divine intervention, but he could not. He was an animist and believed in the existence of individual spirits that inhabit natural objects and phenomena. He could not pray now. Being an animist, he knew even Jesus could not hear his plea. There was no Divine intervention to right his wrong. The only thing he hoped was for Judas to find it within his heart to have mercy on him. Though, common sense told him that Judas was a phony, a cold-hearted scoundrel that put his needs first before anyone else. He could not have mercy on anyone, and that was a fact. He knew many men like Judas, those who did not think of the humanity of man. Rumor had it that Judas was so cold hearted that he even abuses himself; worst still, his wife and children never escaped his damnation. Imagine a man abusing his little angels. How could such a man show compassion to a mere stranger, a perfect stranger who happened to have slugged him in the groin?

Resigned to his fate, Sam wondered out loud: 'Whatever happens to me now is destined to happen. I mean it—it is part of the grand scheme of things in my life, that the Old Man would send me to Bumble, that I would find myself on the wrong side of things, that I

would be axed before I finished my studies, that was in the grand scheme of things. My destiny. My life! It was that simple . . . The Almighty knew it before it became apparent to me; and it is apparent now. How about that? It is clear now!

He pushed these thoughts off his mind as he reflected on what he would tell Mr. Judas the next day when he met him at school. Would Judas have him expelled on the spot? Would he have the gumption to look into Judas' eyes? Or he could simply walk to him like a condemned man awaiting a death sentence. That is what he would do. Yap! He would walk to him like a condemned man and apologize to him for having slugged him.

On second thought, he said defiantly 'No way! I will never apologize. I can't do that! I am a man and when a man is *right*, he does not have to apologize. Yeah! I am *right*. That's it, I am *right*,' he mumbled once more, forgetting the Old Man's exaltation: 'It takes a big man to ask for forgiveness.'

"I am *right, right, right*," he mumbled as he nodded off!

The next morning, before the glimmer of dawn had crept through the sky, Sam literary forced himself out of his bed. He rolled off, pushed his covers to the side, and without moving, he planted his feet on the floor. It was cold. On his mind, an image of Judas as a defeated man from the previous night's fight appeared. It was not a pretty sight, of a man cringing in agony. He smiled triumphantly. That ought to teach him a lesson for stealing other people's girls. Then, his thoughts wandered off to his schooling, the ending of his academic career. Yes, the converted end of his long-awaited graduation! The Old Man would be mighty glad to know he had got his diploma, the papers to prove his worth. This is how he imagined his graduation day.

On his graduation day, he would be the first one to hop out of bed and steal stealthily out of his room to the bathroom before any of the other students awoke. Just for once, he wanted to shower alone, avoiding the usual queue, of countless naked bodies jam-packed in one tiny space fighting for a cold shower. He did not want to smell the musty odors of people's bodies. He did not want to see anyone's nakedness. He did not want to step in any stagnant soap suds. Naturally, he would take his time in scrubbing and splashing cold water over his body. Once finished, he would walk back to his room and put on his neatly ironed clothes. He would be the first one to get to his seat. He would listen, with deaf ears, to boring speeches that come with graduation, as though he cared about the message. When they called his name to receive his diploma, he would sprint for it. "Thank you very much!" he would say in a bow to his Principal, blocking out all the loud applauds. Before leaving Bumble, he would visit the Den one final time. He would eat one bowl of Louise's *nyafu nyafu* and drink a glass of her *changaa*. He would be in the company of his future bride, Nekesa. And with one bow, he would vanish from Bumble, as though he had never existed. He knew the Old Man would not attend his graduation, but after it was all over, he would

return to his grandparents' home. He knew his grandmother would be happy to see him. So, he hoped when he got there, she would cook for him his special dish—*kigangulwa*¹⁰ with her specialty chicken. That is how he pictured it.

Sam stood-up, moved away from his bed and opened the window. Cool air forced its way into the room brushing gently on his exposed body. He ogled outside into the infinite expanse of sky as it slowly plunged itself in its depth. It was a gloomy morning. There was no sun, just a hazy sky. He walked back to his bed and planted his bottom onto it. The bed creaked slightly. He did not seem to be in a hurry to go anywhere. He just sat there dazed and diffident. 'What a day! What a day!' he thought.

Then, out of nowhere, Sam saw a spider crawl on his floor. It was a creepy looking, black, and hairy. The creature moved across the room steadily, methodically, and undisturbed. Its long claw legs stabbing on the floor as though it had no care in the world, but not knowing it could easily lose its life in a blink of an eye. An evil thought crept onto Sam's mind. He had this desire to stomp it with his foot, squash the little creature into a pottage. He rubbed his hands together in preparation. Just as he was about to exercise his final act of extermination, he became distracted. He heard this eerie noise from the outside. Immediately, he moved his eyes away from the spider. Hopping onto his feet, he walked back to the window and peeked through it. He did not see anything except patches of weed that dotted the Bumbe landscape. There was no sun, at least, not yet. The sky was still grey and hazy. He turned away from the window and walked back to his bed. He dropped his bottom onto his bed like a log. Immediately, he remembered the spider and started looking for it, but it had already crawled out of his way and vanished as quickly as it had appeared. That was all there was to it.

¹⁰ A traditional Logooli dish made from pumpkin, zisaaga, and zimbooga.

The morning sun had already peeked behind the clouds when Sam left his room to go to the construction site. He could clearly see its golden dazzle of bright shimmering colours. That morning, he walked with the timidity of a wounded man. He held his head in downcast posture, and his dazed mind raced in many different directions. He passed droves of people, but he did not look at them. He did not see anyone or anything. He simply walked in silence. Every so often, his feet stabbed on sharp pebbles along his path, but he felt no pain. Inwardly, he knew he was in deep trouble. Only that he did not know how to evade it. He even contemplated not going to school for the day, but changed his mind against it. To do so would only delay the inevitable. As he drew close to the construction site, some of his classmates had already arrived, dressed in their usual brown overalls and ready for the hard back-breaking work. He was not the first person to arrive as he customarily did. He was the last, even Judas preceded him.

No sooner had Sam set foot at the site, than his heart started pounding. His eyes glossed over his classmates and then, as he turned around, he noticed Judas near the wheelbarrows. He was walking with a slight limp. Their eyes met. Judas' eyes were red hot, as red as cayenne peppers, but Sam's were filled with fear. No sooner had Judas spotted him, than his eyes darted around in his eye-sockets like those of a cheetah that had finally cornered its prey, and ready to sink its teeth into its already wounded victim without mercy. Immediately, his demeanour changed. The air around them thickened. Judas bit his lower lip; the folds of skin beneath his chin puffed like a frog, and the veins on his face throbbed. The twitching of his facial muscles alerted Sam of an impending attack. To stand his ground, Sam's eyes, which were now full-orbed and unblinking like a toad, gazed into Judas'. This was a show of force, a moment of reckoning. Unfortunately, Sam's moment was short lived. He lowered his eyes to

the ground as it dawned on him that he had no power against his opponent. His foe's eyes were fierce and demoralizing.

Unable to contain his rage, Judas roared, "What the hell are you doing here?"

Sam did not answer. He simply looked at him, but shook to the core. He was afraid of causing a spectacle. His eyes crawled behind his eyelids, and his pupils constricted. A sharp jolt tore through his body, but he could not move. He raised his head up again and gazed into Judas sharp piercing eyes, which remained unflinching. It was a reminder of who had the Might. Sam was defenceless against such a brute force as he felt completely incapacitated to retreat.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he said in a menacing tone and edging towards Sam.

All the boys, who were present startled by Judas's tone, looked at both men with dismay. None of them had privy to what had happened, and neither could they understand the present. Befuddled, they simply looked on as the air thickened and the dark clouds above them moved sluggishly.

"I . . ." Sam was about to say something in a rattling voice, but Judas cut him short.

"I want you the hell out of here right *now*!" Judas roared.

"But I am supposed to . . ."

"No! I want you out, right now! Out of my sight you dirty-filthy-rotten maggot!" Judas bawled.

"Mr. Ju . . .," but the man silenced him completely.

"I'll see to it that you leave here empty handed. As empty as you camel!" he barked. Sam did not make any attempt to speak any further. It would have been pointless. He simply looked at the man with a blank stare.

"Today, you are going to know who the *man* is . . . Me Judas! You messed with the wrong *man* boy," he yelped contemptuously, edging even closer to Sam. "You scoundrel!"

Sensing Judas's intention, Sam stepped back before he could be struck. There was confusion. Other students did not know what to do. That is what happens when a lion attacks a flock and devours a lamb; the rest of the lambs panic. Such was the tumult that broke

when Judas threatened to beat Sam. Timid boys mumbled under their breath ‘What did he do?’ Others looked away or watched the bizarre event unfold, while others simply withheld judgement. Those who were brave enough jumped between the feuding men, diffusing a bad incident from deterioration any further. Sam walked away without saying a word. He heard Judas mumble some dreadful things about him, but he did not pay him any attention; it was pointless. He marched straight to the office hoping to speak with the school Principal about what had and was happening. Unfortunately, before he could get the Principal’s attention, before he could pass beyond his secretary, Judas stormed into the office right behind him. He was fuming profusely. He forced his way passed Sam, passed the secretary and into the Principal’s office. Being a teacher, he had the *right* to speak to him right away before Sam, who had preceded him. He slammed the door behind him. It rattled noisily.

There was nothing Sam could do, but wait in the office muted by the turn of events in his life. He thought he had a chance to defend himself before the Principal. Unfortunately, as one wise man once said, ‘He who accesses a man’s mind first has the power to contaminate it.’ And the Principal’s mind became polluted by Judas’ venom against Sam. He had no fighting chance. Behind the door, he could hear some broken sentences spoken aloud for his hearing.

“That boy out there needs to go . . . I am serious . . . I tell you, I cannot teach him!”

“What boy?” the Principal asked.

“Sam! That’s who, he has to go!”

“Why is that?” Sam heard the Principal ask. What followed was more than he could bear.

“He nearly killed me last night!” he did not hear what followed next. He mumbled something, which he concluded was not meant for his hearing. “I am lucky to be alive today . . . Am telling you,” he yelled. Unfortunately, he did not go into details of what transpired.

“It is either him or me!”

“Why don’t you let me speak to him first?”

“No, he either goes or I go!” Judas said affirmatively and adamantly.

“Ah haa!”

“I mean it! He either goes or I go!” he said again, banging on the table. “That boy out there is bad news. He is a menace to this community—I mean this school. We cannot have riff-ruffs like him here. He is a riff-ruff that shows no respect to his teachers.”

“Doesn’t the boy deserve a *right* to defend himself?”

“What about my rights? You tell me that . . . what about *my rights* as a teacher? Did he think about that last night? Oh! No. Are you now going to take his side, or take his word against mine?” he said with rage. “That boy has to go!”

When he heard those words, Sam knew his fate was sealed. There was no negotiation; at least, so he thought. He did not stay around to hear the Principal telling Judas that the boy deserved a hearing so as to tell his side of the story.

Something simply jolted in him. Sam rose from his seat and bolted out. He wanted to go away, far, far away from Bumbe, far to a land where no one knew his name, an enchanted place where he would become a faceless being, a place where he could begin life anew. As he stepped outside, it was not only hot and humid, but also a cold chill overcame his body. By then, the sun had moved considerably higher into the depth of sky. It was scorching hot, but he could barely feel its menacing heat. Wrath made his pulse beat.

No sooner had he stepped out than he noticed Judas’ bicycle leaning against the walls of the staff office. He stood stock still and ogled it. It was a brand new red bike he used for his daily transport. Its black tires still had the store shine to it save for a thin band of dust from the day’s usage. Its round bell to the right handle had a bright metallic shine to it and glittered in the bright sunshine. It was a tempting getaway. Just at that point, Judas walked out of the Principal’s office. He was bent on making sure that Sam’s future at Bumbe was over. To be sure of it, Judas walked-up to Sam and whispered something into his ear. The fight between the two men was inevitable, but it was Sam who threw the first punch. When it was over, Sam raced to the wall, grabbed the bicycle, jumped onto it and started peddling away, just as Judas emerged from the office.

“You son of a rotten scoundrel bring back my bike!” he yelled. But Sam peddled on, not daring to look back.

He heard sounds. Meaningless noises. Noises from many different directions. He paid a deaf ear to it.

He peddled on with the rage of a mad man out of Bumble Polytechnic to the loud jeers of his schoolmates.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” he heard a voice say.

“Way to go Sam!” someone yelled.

“Boy! You are digging your own grave you bastard,” another voice said.

At the mention of the word ‘bastard,’ Sam slowed down and turned his head back for a second to look. His mind took flight to the first day he had been called a bastard by Ndooli. The word had annoyed him then just as much as it was now. Had he not been in a hurry, he would have stopped to give the person a piece of his mind. In hindsight, he knew it was useless to stop.

“Use your head, will you!” someone else yelled at him. But how could he?

He continued to peddle on with fury now. It was nearly impossible for him to use his head or see the reason in anything anyone told him. His mind was already muddled-up with stuff. Bad stuff. His rational thinking was overcome by irrationality.

He continued to peddle off to the heckling of his onlookers. His right hand was hard pressed on the bell, which continuously screamed grrrrrrr to warn those along his path from impending danger. They scrambled out of his way to the swirling dust as he rode off into the sunset until he became a blank form on their faded horizon.

The next morning, Sam found himself in the Principal's office yet again, just as the radio was announcing the news of an attempted coup in the nation. That was August 1, 1982, and the country was in tumult. For Sam, he was staging a 'coup' of his own; at least, so he thought against his nemesis Judas. He sat there, in that dimly lit room, quietly and eagerly awaiting the man's appearance. The secretary hardly noticed him. When the Principal finally emerged, a surge of emotions—sorrow, rage, anxiety—ambushed him. Distressed, he lowered his eyes to the ground out of shame and cupping his head between the palms of his hands. Tears came prickling at his eyeballs, but being a man, he was not supposed to exhibit this type of weakness.

"Sam," he heard the man call his name. Sam cocked his head slightly to steal a glance at the Principal, but did not respond. Not even 'Yes, sir!' or 'Yes Madam,' which was proper decorum and expected of him. A polite way a student responded to any teacher.

"You know why you are here!"

Sam nodded his agreement, but remained sullenly still and quiet.

"You've tied my hands boy!" Sam did not make a sound. He had nothing to say. How could he convince his Principal that he was moved to justifiable anger in slugging Judas? How could he convince him he had overheard what Judas said to him and had lost his senses? How could he convince him he grabbed Judas' bike and rode it all the way to the lake and broke it into pieces, discarding them into the deep waters of Lake Victoria? How could he tell him he had watched as the pieces floated away, carried by the current until they were submerged under the water? Undoubtedly, he was guilty as he was charged. That was all there was to it.

Dull eyed, he sat in a contemplative repose. Muted, he watched his world collapse like dominoes at a finger's touch—there was no yesterday, there was no today, there was no tomorrow, just emptiness in a harrowing experience.

When the principal finally handed him his expulsion letter, Sam was not surprised. He knew he was provoked to justifiable anger to strike Judas. Yet, he knew his punishment was rather harsh; it did not measure-up to his crime. What sort of reprimand would his teacher get? Had he not been the precipice of the conflict? Had he not coveted his girl, would he have landed in trouble? Common sense told him he should not have fought over a girl, but his emotions overrode his rational thoughts. Then, his mind took flight to the first time he fought someone over a girl. The penalty for his action was not severe. No, there were no consequences. After defeating Ndooli, he walked away triumphantly, and with the girl. Sadly, in his fight with Judas, he was not a winner. He was, definitely, the big loser. Guilty or not, Judas played the victim, deceiving and receiving favouritism from the Principal. How the wheels of justice were turned upside down against him! How the weak fell prey to those with power! For power rests solely with those with might. Sam had no might, falling prey to his accuser. He *knew*, without doubt, his teacher would not be reprimanded. He had the power to alter his life. He also had the power to *alter* anyone's life if he wished, even Nekesa's life; though that was not his concern now.

That morning, even though it was a bright day, Sam did not revel in its pleasantries. Even the dazzling sunny could not jolt him back to happiness. All his dreams of a successful future had come to an abrupt end. Then, gloom fell upon him like a boulder. Dreadful innermost thoughts crept onto his mind like a bad storm. 'I should have killed him when I had a chance. What a creep!' he thought. Judas deserved all these ill thoughts—that he should die and burn in hell. Men like him deserved to go to hell! That is where they belonged, among the despicable sons of donkeys who reap havoc on the innocent in the name of lust like him.' Then, his focus shifted to his predicament. 'The end! The end! No more independence, but dependence. No more independence, but dependence!' He kept on mumbling those words to himself, as though he were a broken record, for he had looked forward to the time when he would be able to support himself. Suddenly, a choking lump crept into his throat. He almost did what he had vowed never to do, no matter what: Beg

the Principal for forgiveness; ‘Sir, I am sorry for my infraction! Please forgive me . . . Please, please, have mercy upon me!’ On second thought, he mumbled, ‘Forget it! Real men don’t beg for mercy!’ He ground his teeth in disgust.

The Principal dangled the letter before him like a fisherman dangles his fishing rod by the riverside. Hesitantly, he extended his hand to receive the note fully aware he was not going to read it. The note reminded him of the day the Old Man’s handed him a signed affidavit that sealed his life’s fate. He gritted his teeth in anger.

“I am sorry Sam,” the Principal said. “I thought you were a good chap!” But he was a good lad; he had simply allowed his emotions to get the best of him . . .

That day, before Sam left Bumbe for good, he visited the Den one last time. This was not only a place he had grown fond of, but also the genesis of his problems. It was only right he should return there once more, just one final time. So, as he walked towards it, it dawned on him that there was not much to it. It was an old ramshackle house. The roof was stained brown with its shingles beginning to show signs of rotting. The door, which had been painted blue, had faded and the paint was beginning to peel off. The joint was a dump. As he drew closer, he began to wonder what it was about the place that made him to find it exciting to visit as regularly as he did. Perhaps it was the companionship.

‘Louise’s *changaa* was the best, first class,’ he said, ignoring the outward ugliness of the place. ‘Even Louise herself was pleasant!’ he thought as he made his way to the Den. ‘I’ll take just one drink, one teensy-weensy drink! That is it and nothing more!’ he said. ‘I’ll bid Louise good-bye after my drink; then, I’ll go home, but where was *home*?’ When he reached doorsteps of the Den, the place had the semblance of a cemetery, dead quiet, save for smoke that oozed out of its open shutters.

Sam could now smell the savoury taste of Louise’s cooking. He imagined her pot of *nyafu nyafu* sizzling over her wood-burning stove. ‘Uuuh uuuh good, I’ll have some of that too, just for the old-time sake!’

As he walked into the Den, Louise was surprised to see him. She had heard rumours of his expulsion and had thought he was long gone.

“What a pleasant surprise to see you!” she said jovially.

“You didn’t think I would leave without seeing you or saying good-bye did you?”

“That thought crossed my mind,” she said half smiling.

“Give me some of that good stuff of yours!” Sam said as he dropped his body in a chair like a log. The room was smoky and stuffy, but he did not care. He just wanted a drink.

“No problem! Glad to see you,” she said as she withdrew into the kitchen only to re-emerge with a glass of her best brew. “This is one is on me!”

“No! I wouldn’t allow it!”

“I insist.”

“No!”

“Really, I insist. Considering all the trouble that girl caused you, it is the least I can offer you,” she added apologetically. Had she not introduced him to Nekesa, he would have completed his diploma. Nevertheless, it was now too late; what was done could not be undone. That was it!

“Okay,” Sam said, hissing through his clenched teeth as memories of his fight with Judas returned to him. He took a generous sip of his drink, closed his eyes, and gulped it down with difficulty. “This stuff is still good, just as I like it!” he said shaking his head violently. He felt in his stomach and veins the spreading warmth of *changaa*. He took another sip and another and another. Before long, it was one glass, two glasses, three . . . The warmth of his drink grew, mounting within him like a golden flame. It felt good, really good. The more he drank, the more he became intoxicated. When he became heavily inebriated, everything around him ceased to be. He did not know himself. He did not know where he was. He tried to think, hoping to reel himself from the stupor of *changaa*, but it was pointless. All his senses were dulled by alcohol. Everything around him swirled like a whirlpool. He strained his eyes to see, but there was too much smoke in the room for him to see anything. He rubbed

them with his right hand, as though that one act would clear his vision, but it was pointless. Defeated, he closed his eyes to it all, but his mind kept on churning and churning around until he lost his sense of balance. He plopped his head on the table as his mind wandered off . . .

While in this state, he felt a soft murmur in his ear. Then, an image of an old man formed within his mind. The man was sitting under the canopy of a tree. By his side, was a young boy about four years of age who was continually chewing something like a cow gnawing cud. The man was old and bore a striking resemblance to the Old Man . . . at least, the way he remembered him to be during the last time of their parting. The young boy, who was very inquisitive, was trying to grapple with the facts of life—what does it mean to be a man? What is truth? He kept on asking the Old Man, much like Sam had done when he was the boy's age.

"Who am I?" the boy was asking. The old man turned his head to face the little boy. He smiled. The boy smiled in return.

"You are Sam!"

"I know that! But who am I, really?"

"You are my grandson . . . my daughter's son!"

"No, but have you ever wondered who we are . . . I mean, as humans?"

"No, because I know who I am. No, who we are. We are like a saffron colour garment, like white wool, like the flames of fire, like the yellow bougainvillea plant, like the running spring, like sudden lightening."

Confused, the boy said, "Haa!"

"We are like that banana plant!" the old man said pointing his wrinkled finger to his banana plantation. Eye-wide and confused, the boy continued munching on whatever it was he was chewing.

Sensing the boy's confusion, he sent him to find a seed of a tree to find its essence.

The boy sprung to his feet and started running across the compound like a headless chicken in search of a seed that would unravel the mysteries of life. He found an avocado seed. It was a

small round brown almost heart-shaped seed. Elated, he returned to where the old man was, waving the seed in his right hand.

“Break it!” the old man commanded. The boy followed his order.

“What do you see?” the old man queried.

“Nothing!” the boy said.

“You see son, from that essence which you do not see, that great avocado tree exists.” The boy was even more confused. “And you my son, you will, someday, grow up to be a great man! You will know then that you can be anything and anyone you can be; that is, if you put your mind to it. You are who you are!”

“I am who I am,” Sam kept on mumbling to himself in his drunken stupor. “I am who I am! No, I am who I have become . . .”

When he woke-up the next morning, he was sprawled on a mat in Louise’s Den. He had no recollection of what had happened to him the previous night. That morning, Sam left Bumble Polytechnic in disgrace. He did not complete his diploma. He had nothing to show for the two years—no, not quite two years, but nearly two—he had been there. He was no different from those boys in his village, like his friend Achaga, who never set foot in college. No, he was no different from those boys that had never attended school. Period! Some of them were even better off than him; they had a place to call home. Worst still, he had lost the girl. She had vanished from his life as quickly as she had come. Once again, in his life, he was alone in a world without mercy. He was alone in the world without money. He was alone in the world with *nowhere* to go.

‘Where to go! Where to go! Where to go!’ he kept on mumbling to himself. He had no place to call home. He had long stopped considering the Old Man’s residency his home, for the yoke of tradition plagued his soul. He belonged to his father, not his grandfather, but who was he? Naturally, the Old Man’s habitat was his only viable option. Even though he contemplated not going back there, he had no other choice, Mung’oma was still *home*!

Sam returned to the Old Man's homestead empty handed like the prodigal son who had squandered all his inheritance only to return and beg for his father's forgiveness. Only that there were some significant differences: Sam was not returning to his father's home. He was not given a new robe to wear. He did not receive a ring for his finger or sandals for his feet. There was no fattened calf slaughtered to mark his arrival. There was no celebration. His grandmother did not have a chicken to slaughter for her prodigal son. Even Sam, himself, did not come home begging for forgiveness. His homecoming was marred with his brokenness because life at Bumble Polytechnic had robbed him of his manhood. He had also lost his sense of balance. So, when he got home, he simply withdrew from everyone—the Old Man, his friends, his grandmother, even Ajema.

Having lost faith in people, he reverted to his old life, of eating and brooding. Food became his comfort like most people nursing a depression. He ate and slept. That was it. Other times, when he was not indulging on food, he climbed up the gum tree, a place he had hidden many times—under its towering green. There, he remained from sun up to sun down brooding over his misfortunes, unless, of course, if it rained. Only then would he withdraw to his room and lock himself there. He would lower his body onto his bed, close his eyes, as though in wait for his grandmother's calling at dusk for supper, and she often did; he would fall asleep only to awaken at night. In this manner, he festered in his aloneness for a very long time.

A year later, when he had gained some sanity, Sam's first impulse was to leave Mung'oma Village, again. Only this time, he was not going to school. Neither was he going to college. He was going away indefinitely. For a young man his age, change was good for him. The truth was that the village had become a desolate dump. Even his best friend, Achaga, had realized it and moved to Kakamega, a nearby

town. He was working there; and, for Sam, to continue living in his village was simply absurd.

With his mind made-up, the hardest part was breaking the news to the Old Man. At first, he did not have the gumption to do so. He wondered if he would approve. He brooded over the matter for days. In the end, after serious contemplation, he broke the news to him the night before his departure. It was better that way. They had just finished supper, and he was getting ready to go to bed when he told him.

“Guga,” he began his conversation as delicately as he could. “You know ever since my return from Bumble, I have not worked.”

The Old Man whose back was buried in his chair and nearly dozing, after indulging incessantly on a hearty meal of *Ugali*, peanut butter *kunde*, and roasted chicken, bolted himself up. He shook sleep from his eyes as he raised his eyebrows to look at his grandson. He grunted noisily. Sam paused, stealing a glance at the Old Man and regarding his motions carefully.

“Guga,” he began again. “I want to go to Kakamega to find a job. If I continue to stay here, my life will never change.”

The Old Man grunted. Sam paused and looked at him again, but in silence.

Finally, he added: “I have no job or future here. I have nothing!”

“I see,” the Old Man said. “And when do you plan on leaving?”

“Tomorrow!”

“Where will you stay?”

“With a friend!”

“Does this friend have a name?”

“Of course yes, Achaga!”

“I see!” the Old Man mumbled. He reclined against the flat firm panel of the chair, burying his head into its soft cushion until he was sitting in a comfortable position. Then, he closed his eyes. He did not add a word about his grandson’s impending departure. Sam stood there watching him for a few seconds, as his lower and upper eyelids gently locked. All along, he had hoped the Old Man would add a word, but he never did. Disappointed, Sam walked away. That night, the Old Man did not pray for Sam’s departure.

The next morning, Sam woke-up early and gathered his meagre belongings in a nice bundle and stuffed them in a duffle bag. Hurriedly, he dashed outside, washed his face, brushed his teeth, and returned to his room. He jammed his toiletries in his bag and dressed as quickly as he could, draping his almost tattered grey jacket over his white sleeveless shirt. He slung the duffle bag on his left shoulder and before the sun had completely peeked above the misty Maragoli Hills, he peeped outside through the window. The trees on the hills reared up through the mist, cloaked in the mysterious veil of fog. The shimmering light permeated through the misty fog above the Hills and was as bright as it was blinding. He squinted struggling to see, but, inwardly, he was delighted. Going to an urban city was a life-altering event, and he knew it. He dreamt of being the kind of man who commanded respect. And this was his biggest move toward that end; it was his choice and on his terms. Once he landed a job as a mason, his life will be perfect. Yes, he will earn his due respect through the strength of his hands.

That morning, as he walked out of the house into the womb of the universe, he felt chillness to the core of his bones. Even his teeth chattered, but his resolve was greater than any coldness he felt. His grandmother did not bid him farewell, for she remained in the dark until his exit. She did not buy him new shoes. She did not buy him new sheets or towels. She did not prepare for him breakfast. She did not do anything to mark his departure. Neither did the Old Man bid him farewell, for he was still under the spell of slumber. Sam shut the door behind him, pulled the tips of his jacket together, buttoned it, and marched out of the Old Man's compound hoping to find greener pastures wherever his fate took him. He did not look back in his exit .

..

Part Two

Son—

Cry freedom cry

Till your heart bleeds of injustice

Cry freedom cry

Till the world awakens to your plight

Cry Freedom Cry

Till your hopes come true!

Sam's journey to Kakamega was eventful. At day break, he hopped into a van with the inscription *Mwenda Tayari*. Poor man, he chose a wrong day for his journey. For he was not only rammed in the van like a sardine in a jar among students returning home for their Christmas holiday, but also, there were many other passengers along their travels. The van was hot and stuffy that he could smell the repugnant stench of people's sweat and other unpleasant bodily odours—sweat, pungent-sweaty-armpits, foul mouth and . . . It was as though some of those travellers had neither bathed nor brushed their teeth. He wished he had been sitting by the window to thrust his nose outside for fresh air, but that was hardly the case. He was sandwiched between two women on a back seat. One of the women had two children, a toddler and an infant. The other had a toddler. The woman with two children, without much of a request, pushed her toddler onto Sam's lap. The boy, a filthy looking chap with sleep matter in his eyes and a runny nose, sheepishly and without protest plopped his bottom onto Sam's lap, just as the driver revved the engine. The van hit a bump, tossing him up and down. He grunted his teeth with disgust as the force of the speeding van forced him to jerk forward. The boy grabbed onto his shirt tightly to avoid falling. There was nothing he could do now. If only he had money, he would have bought an extra space on the van. He had seen many people do that . . . If only he had money!

The woman with the infant pulled her bulging breast out of her blouse and rammed it into the baby's mouth. She did not bother to conceal her act. The baby, with hungry eyes, clung onto her mother's nipple and hungrily began to suckle. Sam watched this spectacle with detached interest. The van's engine revved as its wheels rolled on tirelessly. It stopped regularly to drop or pick up new passengers, or when others disembarked. That was all Sam could remember. He must have fallen asleep, in spite of the bumpiness in the road, and missed the municipal sign that read "WELCOME TO

KAKAMEGA.” When he opened his eyes, it was to the loud screeching sound of the tires grinding on asphalt and to the loud clamouring voices of people at the bus stop . . .

That was close to midday, and the sun was sweltering hot with a slight drifting wind. The draft transformed the bus stop into an instant dust ball, which made it a bit unpleasant. Most marketers seemed oblivious to it all. For Sam, it was a mere trivial distraction. As he disembarked the van, holding a duffle bag in his hand, he noted that the town was not only dry and dusty, but also, buzzing with a lot of activity. No sooner had he stepped to the ground than he slung his bag on his left shoulder. He stopped just long enough to inspect his surroundings. There were many people in town—men and women, young and old. There were no trees, at least, not as much as in his village and, certainly, no boulders like those that dotted Mung’oma landscape. Instead, there were many buildings, buses, *matatus*, vans, from different towns—Kisumu, Eldoret, Webuye, Mumias, Nairobi, Bungoma, Busia—some arriving or about to take off. Traders were busy lugging their merchandise from the bus stop to their stalls in the market. Others were pushing carts full of commodities—from sacks of potatoes, second-hand clothes, fruits, to anything that deserved to be transported. Nearby, there was a stall of rowdy chickens imprisoned in *lisela*.¹¹ A rotund man selling them was engaged in a transaction with some woman and was almost oblivious to everything around him. A woman selling fried fish nearby was surrounded by her regular customers—most looking for a bargain for her fresh fish. ‘Two hundred and fifty shillings for this one,’ she was insisting. ‘You will like it!’ While petty traders were busy haggling with their customers amid jam-packed vehicles selling a lot of odds and ends—handkerchiefs, padlocks, *sim-sim* balls, sweets, fruits, roasted maize, roasted peanuts, queen cakes, sodas. Savvy travellers were busy looking for cheap rates for their travels. Boisterous turn-boys, notorious for their insolent behaviour, were full of activity of running around, like headless chickens, pestering

¹¹ A kind of weaved basket solely for securing chickens.

unwilling travellers to board *their* vans to whatever destinations of their choice.

Sam watched all these activities like a lost soul in a sea of madness. For a while, he just stood there, taking it all in, all the while he wondered if he had made the right choice in leaving the security of his village for the city. He did not know anyone in this new place save for Achaga, his childhood friend, who promised him temporary accommodation. He had visited him once, but that was long time. He lived in Maraba suburb located to the south end of Kakamega town in a one room flat. If only he had a cell phone, he would have called Achaga to alert him of his arrival, but Achaga's luck mirrored his own; he probably did not have a cell phone.

He started walking away from the bus stop towards Maraba, muscling his way out amid hurrying travellers. Some turn-boy mistaking him for a traveller tugged at his duffle bag, intending to pull him into a van headed for Mumias town, only to realize he had reached his destination. He let go of Sam's bag. Sam shifted it from his left shoulder to the front. He had to be careful enough to ensure he arrived at his destination with his bag. He had heard numerous stories of passengers who end up being separated from their belongings and, at times, losing them altogether. "One has to be careful in such places," he mumbled.

A boy trader, probably thirteen years of age, walked by selling bananas—they were big, bright, yellow and fresh—hard to resist. They were bigger than he had ever seen. The boy was heading towards the bus stop. There he would solicit a buy from hungry travellers. At the sight of the bananas, Sam's stomach began to churn, and his eyes popped wide open. They were irresistible delicious devils. Suddenly, he began to feel hungry. It was at that point he remembered he had not eaten anything all morning.

"Hey you!" Sam yelled after the boy. The boy stopped and turned back. "How much are you selling your bananas?"

"Three for five shillings."

"That is too much!" Sam said without thinking. In the village, they were not that expensive. He could have easily got ten bananas for three shillings.

“Can’t you see they look very fresh and ripe? You can’t find one that looks nearly as good.” The boy insisted, and he was right.

“Yeah . . . yeah. Take three for three,” Sam said dismissively.

“Where do you come from man . . . the bush?” The boy said with a snicker. Sam did not respond to the boy’s indignity.

“As I said, it is three for five!” the boy said sternly with unblinking eyes. Sam regarded the boy for a fraction of a second. The boy sensing Sam’s reservation started walking away towards the bus stop. He was certain to get more customers there. Most travellers prefer bananas to any other commodities sold in buses or vans. His were clean and uncontaminated. Unfortunately for Sam, the pangs of hunger slowly continued to gnaw at his guts.

“Mister! Mister!” Sam called the boy again. The boy turned and gave him a meaningful gaze. “I will have three for five if you don’t mind.”

Smiling, the boy turned back. Sam thrust his hand into his pocket and fished out a shiny five shilling coin. He handed it to the boy, who handed him the bananas in exchange.

“Thanks . . . I hope you are my good-luck charm,” the boys said, shoving the money in his pocket. He started to whistle as he walked away and smiling triumphantly after his first successful sell.

As Sam ambled away from the boy towards Achaga’s home, he peeled one of the bananas and took a small bite. It was sweet and tasty that he wished he had bought more. He stopped, turned around, looking in the boy’s direction, but he had vanished, swallowed by the crowds. He turned back again to continue his stroll to Maraba. He took another bite and another. And with just a few more bites, he consumed an entire banana. He threw the peeling to the wayside as he continued on. He saved the other two for when he got to Achaga’s flat, which was about three miles away from the town. It was not a big suburb, but not as small as Mung’oma village. He trod westwards towards the junction to Maraba. The colours of town thrilled him, and he was certain he had made the right decision. Numerous kiosks dotted his pathway; some full of merchandise, while others were barely stocked. He could see jackets, t-shirts, dresses, and anything worth hanging on hangers draped inside and all

the way to the door. On the counters, numerous odds and end—pots and pans, tea-strainers—remained. Along the road, numerous merchants were selling *mitumba*—“T-shirts *moja kwa shilling tano!*”¹² a man was yelping. ‘Blouse *maridadi sana bapa.*’¹³ There were also other people selling onions, tomatoes, and other vegetables. He watched as passers-by went about their business—from a man pushing a Farmers Choice wagon selling sausage and other delicacies to aimless loiterers. The aromatic smells of food, and these new sites were overwhelming to Sam. He descended a small slope that curved slightly to the left and then ascended up a steep knoll that dead ended into the road bound for Eshikoti; the same road led to Maraba. He turned right at the intersection and began his slow descend towards the suburb. The road was smooth and covered with black asphalt unlike the meandering maram road to his village. He walked down a steep embankment, passed the Indian cremation heading towards the Kenya Seed—its steel gates were unfastened. Numerous cars drove in and out. Sam pressed on. At the end of the tarmac, the road forked, one side veering toward the right, while the other to the left all the way to an open field where there was a halted construction site; both were dirt roads. For a split second, Sam stood still debating whether to turn right or continue to the left. He adjusted the weight of his bag from the front to his left shoulder. Both roads led to the same destination, though one was shorter than the other. A sharp turn to the right would lengthen his trip. This was the same road most vehicles took. Nevertheless, he would have to walk past the Kenya Cereal Board; then make another sharp left turn to head-on down to Maraba. The road did not go any further beyond the Cereal Board; it dead ended at its hedge, and way down yonder, there was a plush wide spread of green—trees, shrubs, maize. He took the right turn, walking leisurely towards the Cereal Board. It was good for him to know his surroundings. When he got around the bend in the road, he veered toward the left; it was a sharp turn. He continued on and on down the slope. There were more shops along the way and a nursing

¹² Second hand T-shirts—one for five shillings.

¹³ Very beautiful

home to the left—a lot of activity was going on there. He wondered if he could look for a job there, like a yardman. He also passed a charcoal stall, but he knew he could never work at a place like that—it was too filthy. Women traders were busy selling tomatoes, onions, and vegetables. He walked on until he made his way to Maraba . . . It took him a little over a half hour.

He had no problem finding Achaga's flat because it was a block south of Maraba Primary, nestled among many newcomers to the region—most of whom had migrated to Kakamega from different regions—Central province, Mombasa, Nyanza. Because his neighbours were from diverse ethnicities—Kisii, Logooli, Luo, Kikuyu, and many others—they spoke, for the most part, Kiswahili, unless, of course, when among their own kind. That was the beauty to the area. They lived in harmony with one another as Kenyans.

Achaga was not home on his arrival. The compound in which he lived was not exquisite, but was fenced and fortified by two giant brown steel gates. Inside, there were two giant buildings structured in an L-shape and looked more or less like dormitories. The compound was not well manicured, but was not a squalid. Each building had about seven to eight doors—one for each tenant. There was a giant veranda that ran from one end of the building to the other. Each room had one giant window and a door and both painted light blue. There were two steps that led to each room. When Sam arrived, he walked all the way to his friend's flat, he was not there. It was flat number 5. There was no need to knock at the door because there was a giant golden padlock hanging down its latch. He decided to sit on his doorsteps to await his return.

He took his duffle bag off his shoulder and set it by his side. Because it was in the middle of the day, most people—men to be in particular—were probably out working. Only children and unemployed or nursing mothers were home. Toddlers were running up and down the veranda, as though they had no care in the world. At times, he would hear a mother yelling after a child: 'Don't run you will hurt yourself,' but the little monsters hardly paid her attention. Occasionally, he saw some secondary school students returning home for the holidays to their mothers' warm welcome. 'If only I was

returning home . . . Yeah, returning home!’ he thought nostalgically. His grandmother would certainly welcome him with his favourite meal. He felt a jolt of hunger in his stomach at that recollection. Realizing he still had two uneaten bananas, he took a second one, peeled it, and started eating it slowly. It was as succulent as the first; he could taste its sweetness anew. Just as he was about to take his last bite, he was startled by a young man, almost his age. He was short, frail looking and wiry, with a small head and sunken cheekbones. His hair was brownish and unkempt, with a tint of grey. On his face, he had this disarming and open smile. He was wearing dirty blue overalls as though returning from a hard back-breaking job. He seemed to have appeared from nowhere; though had Sam been paying attention, he would have seen from where he had emerged. The young man was puffing smoke from his Sportsman cigarettes and forming nice round rings as he made his way towards Sam. His lips were much darker than his complexion—perhaps from years of smoking. The young man walked straight to him and plopped his bottom on the steps too, right by his side as though the two were already familiar acquaintances.

“What’s up man?” he said in a soft spoken manner. That is how he spoke.

“Not much . . . just chilling!” Sam said as though he was already accustomed to the town lingo. His voice was low, as if he was afraid of the man’s straight forwardness.

“That banana looks mighty delicious,” the man added.

“It is very tasty . . . I have to say,” Sam said, taking his last bite into the succulent banana and contemplating whether or not he should share the remaining one with a perfect stranger. The man watched him as he munched on it, as though he were dying for a bite himself.

“Here you can have this one,” Sam said handing the man his last banana.

“No,” the man said.

“Please, take it! I have eaten two already,” Sam assured him.

The young man gawked at the banana, but did not say anything.

“Really, take it.”

“Thanks!” the man said, reluctantly taking the banana.

He extinguished his cigarette and immediately started peeling the fruit. In just three giant bites, he inhaled it. Can you believe that! He just inhaled it ravenously. Afterwards, he relit his cigarette and took a few puffs. Then, he offered it to Sam, but he declined. He was not a smoker and despised anyone who polluted his lungs with the filthy stuff. He hated all drugs and cigarettes, but he liked to drink his *changa*.

“You shouldn’t smoke that stuff! It is not good for your health,” Sam said.

“I know, but once you get hooked, it is not easy to quit!” he said.

“Have you ever tried?”

“Yeah . . . I have tried several times, but I always . . . well, it is a bad habit.”

“By the way, you wouldn’t happen to know Achaga, would you?” Sam asked.

“But of course . . .” the man said exuberantly. “He is a buddy of mine.”

“I see . . . How long have you two been buddies?”

“A little over a year.”

“So, how did you two meet, if I may ask?”

“I met him at a construction site. He and I were working for my brother . . . He usually gets these construction contracts, and he does hire hired hand regularly.”

“What is your speciality?”

“I am a mason by trade!”

“Oh . . . I see!” Sam said elated. ‘What a lucky day. Thank God,’ he thought silently.

“How about you? . . . New to town?”

“Yes, Yes! Just arrived, about a half an hour ago.”

“You don’t say!”

“Really!” Not wanting to waste time with useless conversation, he added “You wouldn’t happen to know where a guy might find a job around here, would you?”

“Not right now, but I would have to ask my brother this evening. He might have something,” he paused. Took a puff, and then added, “What is your line of work?”

“I am a trained mason,” he said masking his grand lie—of course he knew he did not leave Bumbé Polytechnic with much of a paper to verify his accomplishment. “Right now, I’ll take anything.”

“I see! Where are you staying?”

“I hope to stay with Achaga for a little while. That is, until I can find a job and my own place.”

“Okay man, thanks for the banana again,” the man said getting ready to leave. “I will talk to my brother and let you know.”

Then, it dawned on him he had not asked the man his name. “Mister,” Sam said. “I don’t know your name.”

“Oh, silly me . . . My name is Kimani, but most of my friends call me Koza.”

“Call me Sam.”

“Glad to have made your acquaintance,” Koza said.

“The pleasure is all mine,” Sam said, just as Koza to puff and walked off. Sam watched him until he disappeared behind the steel doors and vanished altogether. This way, Sam met his first friend, a man who later paved way for his first job, just an hour after his arrival into town . . .

That evening, by the time Achaga returned home, the sun had already set, and Sam had landed his first job. Sam spent a fruitful afternoon getting to know his neighbours. He talked to just about everyone who came his way. Be it toddlers simply running around and looking for a play pal, young boys, mothers attending to their children, elderly men who seemed to have nothing to do during the day. He spoke to all of them; at least, those who were willing enough to lend him a listening ear. He was unassuming. Even Koza returned later that afternoon, with some good news. He told him that luck was on his side, for his brother had landed a contract from one of the town's tycoon, and he needed workers. Those hired would be constructing hostels for rental . . . That was perfect. It was a monumental task, and plenty of workers were needed—what a better way to hire a man hungry enough for a job. Such men are easily manipulated and work harder than those who are secure in their employment. They can work for almost nothing. Sam was a perfect candidate, for he could and would take any job and for as little money as possible. He agreed to work for Koza's brother. He extended the same offer to Achaga in his absence, a message Sam freely conveyed to his friend later that night.

When he returned home that evening, Achaga was taken by surprise to find his old friend at his doorsteps. His blithe was unsurpassed; one could sense and feel it from his tone of voice. He bombarded his friend with numerous questions—trivial questions:

“When did you get here?”

“This afternoon!”

“Why didn't you tell me you were coming?”

“It was unexpected!”

“I would have waited for you or returned home sooner?”

“It is okay . . . I had an opportunity to meet some of your neighbours!”

“How is the Old Man? How about your grandmother?”

“They are both fine; thank God!”

“How about everyone else—Nico, Jusa, Kahuga—you know, those who matter?”

“They were all fine when I left.”

“Gosh! I am sorry. I was so happy to see you that I even forgot my manners. Please do come in!” he said as he thrust the key in his padlock. He turned the key to the right until he heard a clicking sound. He wiggled the padlock out of the latch and unlocked the door to let his visitor into the house.

Achaga’s flat was not exclusive. It was a small single room, with one large blue sofa—the only major furniture in the living room. He separated his bedroom from his living area with one giant blue chequered sheet. The living room left a lot to be desired. There was a tiny table in one corner with a blue lantern and a matchbox. There was also Kenya Standard newspaper folded in half and thrown on the table haphazardly—it was hard to tell when the paper was bought. The room had one window, dark and almost uninviting, but Achaga’s cheery attitude made for its dilapidated condition.

No sooner had the two entered the house than Achaga started preparing food—first it was tea, followed by a hearty meal of *ugali*, *sukuma wiki*, with beef, something he seldom ate, but because he had company, he indulged himself. The men shared an evening of laughter as they swapped stories of their immediate past. Sam talking about his Bumbe experiences, while Achaga told him plenty about Kakamega. It was way past mid-night when they retired to bed . . .

The next morning, Sam's day began at dawn. Being it was his first day of real work, he was at his most ebullient. He expeditiously jumped out of his couch, which was his bed, and hastened to get ready. That was even before the sun graced earth with its starry rays. Achaga was already up and had prepared tea—their breakfast. Hurriedly, he washed his face, brushed his teeth, ran a brush through his knotted hair and got dressed in his khaki overalls—perfect for construction work. Sighing deeply, he mumbled to himself: 'Not bad!' The two companions took their tea in silence—it was dry tea without an escort as they always say. They were out of the door in a jiffy, before seven in the morning. They wanted to be among the first people to arrive at the construction site. Sam knew the routine of such jobs all too well because he had done it many times when he was at Bumba—from measuring wheelbarrows of sand, hauling cement, to fetching water. He remembered how, with the use of a shovel, he scooped sand depositing it onto the wheelbarrow until it reached its maximum. He would then drop the shovel onto the ground, spit in one of his hands, bring both hands together, and gently rub them several times. He remembered how he would then wipe them off on his posterior and, afterwards, wrap his fingers around the handles of the wheelbarrow tightly clutching onto them. He would lift-up its hind legs, and by exerting all the energy in his body, he would bulldoze the sand filled wheelbarrow to the mixing site. There, he would deposit the sand through a sieve to remove any impurities. Then he repeated the process again, of shovelling sand, wheeling it to the mixing site again and again and again until he had the required amount. Yes! He knew and understood what awaited him once he got to his first job . . . He would give it all his best. His employer would not regret hiring him.

As the two walked out of the house, the sun was just gradually beginning to ascend the eastern sphere, leaving a bright orange glow on the horizon. Achaga closed the door right behind them and

pushed the latch in its place. He inserted his giant gold padlock in the latch, positioned it, and pressed on it hard until he heard a clicking sound. He pulled on it to ensure that it was secure. He dropped the keys in his pocket, as the two started walking toward the gate, passing through its two brown colossal steel gates. They turned right and started heading up the steep embankment, past the Primary school, toward the construction site at the outskirts of town. The hostels were located about a half a mile away from the tarmac road.

‘You will see it . . . just look for the empty field with an already existing foundation. Someone had already begun the job, but quit in the process,’ Koza instructed.

The men’s hike was long and hard, not like when one walks to Maraba. They toddled in silence, like two perfect strangers, but Sam’s face shone with delight and his eyes sparkled. He had not, in his wildest dreams, imagined landing his first job on the day of his arrival into town. What a blessing. The morning was still chilly, and he wished he had taken his jacket, but that did not deter him. He walked on with a steady pace. Soon, beads of perspiration begun oozing off his brow and forgot altogether the chillness of the morning. It took them a good forty-five minutes and by the time they arrived, they were already exhausted and their bodies all sweaty.

They were not the first to arrive as they had hoped, but there were a little over twenty other young men already lined-up awaiting their chance for employment. Suddenly, Sam experienced this hollow feeling in his stomach. What if Koza’s brother did not like him—being new to town and all that? What would he do? What if he did not hire him? His body broke into a cold sweat. His hands became sweaty and beads of perspiration began to form on his brow. He even began to feel nauseous—what an icky feeling. He pushed these thoughts and feelings out of his mind the moment he saw Koza. Immediately, he recognized him from the previous day. He was still wearing the same overalls he had on when they met. He was sitting on top of a pile of cement bags and was puffing his cigarettes, deeply in thought. His brother was not there. The pair paced towards him with a sense of familiarity. Although Sam had only met Koza in a matter of hours, it was as though they were firm friends. Their

familiarity—and ease with one another surprised Achaga—because they were so dissimilar. Sam was brutish, at times, and Koza was as meek as a lamb.

Koza did not notice them walk towards him. His eyes were to the ground—whatever ailed him, only he and his Maker knew. He was twirling his cigarette in his left hand.

“What is wrong with you?” Achaga said as the two approached Koza.

“Aah . . . Sam and Achaga,” he said. “Glad you are here.”

“You know we couldn’t miss this for anything in the world,” Achaga noted. “My friend here deserves a fresh start.”

Sam snickered and furrowed his brow disapprovingly. “You shouldn’t say things like those. The man might think I am desperate.” Yet, in actuality, Achaga was right; Sam needed a fresh start.

“Don’t worry my friend. We all need a fresh start at some point in our lives,” Koza said reassuringly.

Looking at the lined men, Achaga observes, “I didn’t think you’d have many candidates for the job!”

“Didn’t think so either, but these are tough times,” Koza explained. He moved his cigarette to his lips and took a prolonged sniff and puffed out an enormous cloud of smoke. He was dazed and diffident.

“So when do we begin?” Sam asked.

“As soon as Kamau gets here,” he said without looking at Sam. He took another sniff; smoke oozed out of his nose like a locomotive.

“I see!” Sam said with a sigh.

Koza took another sniff and a puff, a sniff and a puff, until he had smoked all the way to its butt. Bending over, stabbed it to the ground, and until he had extinguished the flames on its tip. He pushed it right into the dust.

Then, he rose-up and walked to the lined men. He had to make the *right* selection. And like someone who knew his job, he inspected the men. From their sheer physical built to how they were dressed or spoke. The worst thing would be to hire loud indolent men. “You and you and you, move to this side,” he barked, beginning to sort the

men out. He inspected them carefully. Those who were thin and frail, or unfit for the job, were dismissed out rightly. “You, I don’t think you are up for the job.” The singled man protested: “Just give me a chance Koza . . . I know I can do it.” The man’s thin frame was no different from Sam, but Koza could not hear it. He was cold and unfeeling.

“I am sorry mister, I only need ten men. I have nothing for you today,” he explained to another. The man did not budge. Out of the twenty, he picked eight.

Watching the process was painful. To occupy his mind, Sam sat down in the same spot Koza had been from when they got there. And bending over, he reached out for the cigarette butt Koza had buried under the dust and started twirling it between his fingers. ‘This crap kills men!’ he mumbled to himself. He dropped it again to the ground and buried it much deeper into the dust than Koza had done. He stole a quick peek at Koza and the men. Koza was now arguing with another man who did not want to be turned away—if only he had a better way of weeding off chuff other than an arbitrary selection, it would have made his task easy. There was no rubric . . . Just one’s sheer physicality; after all, the nature of the job was physical. ‘I could have been one of those men,’ he thought, but remembering an old Swahili saying: *Baraka ya mwenzio si yako*. ‘My lucky day,’ was all he said.

It was during this time that he noticed a tall man, hefty and deftly dressed in loose fitting jeans, wearing a bright-red T-shirt and a cap, appearing from the direction of town. He walked with a majestic swagger. His physical demeanour commanded awe such that even the belligerent men who were giving Koza grief about being turned away stopped talking; they were frozen in fear as though the man was an unhinged mason. Most of them were familiar with his antics and did not deserve an introduction—some of those men who had been turned away started walking off.

“Koza,” the man said in a robust voice, while his eyes swept the entire construction site. Everything was in place—several wheelbarrows, cement, sand, shovels, two tanks of water, concrete, all the necessary equipment—and, of course, handy men ready to

embark on their hard back-breaking job. A few of those who had been turned away still lingered hoping for a miracle lest Koza changed his mind. "Got the boys ready?" he said with a snicker.

"Of course," Koza said. Almost as an afterthought, he corrected himself: "Of course, Sir!"

With microscopic eyes, the man inspected every single man Koza had chosen, from head to toe—what they were wearing, how they were standing, whether they were thin or fat. When his eyes suddenly fell on Sam, he stopped, and gave him a thorough run down, as though he were meat in butchery. He was the only man, save for Koza, wearing overalls. Suddenly, a feeling of nervousness returned to him. What if the man did not like him? He reminded him of Judas . . . The man who destroyed his masonry career.

"Where did you get this one?" the man queried.

Before Koza could say anything, Achaga intervened: "May I take this opportunity to introduce my lifelong friend, Samuel Adooli." The man did not say a word, as though he had not heard. He looked at Sam from head to toe. "He and me grew-up together . . . Just came in yesterday," Achaga added.

"I see . . . So you are the little rascal who gave Koza your last banana yesterday?" he said with a mischievous laughter. "Did he tell you he can kill a man for a banana?"

"No!" Sam said with a smile . . . suddenly the tenseness he was experiencing began to dissipate. "He did not, but was glad to share."

"And this here, my good friend," Koza declared: "Is my brother Kamau . . . the one and only!" Sam held his right hand out towards Kamau for a handshake.

"I go by Sam," he said as the two shook hands.

"I hear you are a trained mason!"

"Yes, indeed," Sam declared. "I went to school at Bumbé Polytechnic." This was Sam's saving grace . . . Had Kamau based his judgement on his physical built, he probably would not have made the cut. He needed another set of trained eyes to see the project to completion and with utmost accuracy.

Now, with all the introductions out of the way, Kamau signalled all recruits by his side and checked each man's abilities. There was

just one little detail he still had to finalize, each man's pay. The rate for all hired hand in the entire town was standard—one hundred shillings a day. For Sam, he was offered two hundred shillings simply because he had been trained. Kamau assigned each man his respective task. He was not the kind of man afraid to get his hands dirty; he, too, with the assistance of Sam began to inspect the foundation to ensure its stability, while those assigned to measure sand were busy at it. And in a matter of minutes, the site was transformed almost immediately into some kind of assembly line, with men overexerting themselves tirelessly . . .

That day, the boys worked tirelessly like beasts of burden. Sam's thrill of having a job superseded its hardships. He had even forgotten that masonry was a taxing profession. Nevertheless, when his body was quickly exhausted after only a couple of hours, blame it on his yearlong period of inactivity, he remembered its hardships only too well . . . At the dawn, he crawled out of his bed begrudgingly and got ready for his daily training. That was even before the sun graced earth with its starry rays. He ate his breakfast first, and then he made his way to the construction zone . . . Once there, he measured wheelbarrows of sand. With the use of a shovel, he scooped sand depositing it onto the wheelbarrow until it reached its brim. He dropped the shovel onto the ground, spat in one of his hands, bringing both hands together, and then gently rubbed them several times until he felt some traction. Then, he wiped them off onto his posterior. Afterwards, he wrapped his fingers around the handles of the wheelbarrow tightly clutching onto them. Lifting its hind legs, he exerted all the energy in his body and bulldozed the sand filled wheelbarrow to the mixing site. There, he deposited the sand through a sieve to remove any impurities. He repeated the process again and again and again, of shovelling sand, of wheeling it to the mixing site until he had the required amount. He mixed it all up and then his next assignment would begin; hence, the monotony of his work continued. It was a mindless experience, but one that required sheer brute force . . . As he thought of these things, he found it exceedingly hard to keep pace with some of the seasoned handy men Kamau had

lured by the promise of a quick pay, even if the pay was not that much—one hundred shillings.

Sam and the other men were destined to work hard overexerting themselves no matter what, acclimating themselves the hot weather. Even the relentless sweltering heat of Kakamega seemed to have colluded with his employer against him. There were no trees anywhere nearby under which to seek shelter from the sweltering heat. Once in a while, he wished he was at the Old Man's home. There he would have reclined under the canopy of the gum tree with its light delicate foliage to keep cool. Conversely, had he been at Bumble, he would have ended his day at the Den quenching his parched throat with a glass of Louise's special brew.

Given the time of year, the Kakamega landscape was dry and had no luxuriant to it save for the almost bare shrubbery with its leaves wilted and tainted by an earthly color. Hardly any draft passed to sooth and cool his drenched musty body. Sweat glided down his brow, his back, and his armpits as though his pores were a spring. One could easily see a blotch of perspiration, an ugly mark, on his shirt under his armpits. His cement covered hands were useless to him now—he could not dare use them to dry his brow. Instead, he dried it off with the sleeve of his shirt. His hair, his eyelids, his hands were all ashen.

By noon, the boys were surprised to see a woman—tall and slim, wearing a yellow *kanga* around her waist—walking stealthily towards them. As she approached, she swayed her round hips in a circular motion with her neck held high and straight above her shoulders. Her eyes were sharp and piercing. On her head, she balanced a basket; while in her right hand, her thin fingers were tightly wrapped around a handle of a half-filled five-gallon jerry-can. The woman came to deliver the boys lunch at Kamau's request. By then, the sun was sizzling hot and the wind blew steadily ushering in the early afternoon heat. Beads of sweat hang loosely upon her brow, but there was no way she could wipe it dry, neither did she seem perturbed by it. Above the Kakamega sky, the clouds moved steadily like giant floating masses temporarily concealing the sun, but the heat seethed through them.

“Mama Njoki . . . You are here already?” Kamau said, as though he were surprised to see her. Secretly, he was happy, knowing full well that it was her punctuality he admired and the very reason he had given her the job. Most other women from the area observed Kenyan time—where twelve noon translated to two in the afternoon.

“You said noon . . . didn’t you?” she said with a charming voice that revealed her tender personality.

“Yeah! My boys should be starving about right now.”

“I see,” she said with a smile.

“They have been working since day break you know.” It was precisely at that time when Sam approached them. He was panting like an old dog almost running out of breath.

“Got some water Mama?” he said bending in a forward stoop with his hands firmly pressing on his knees. His tone was so abrasive that one could have concluded that the heat had robbed him of his common sense.

Mama Njoki, insulted by Sam’s abrasiveness, stopped and gave him a long mean look. Being a cultured woman, she could not overlook Sam’s uncouth behavior. “Don’t you have any manners?” she said . . . though inwardly she was thinking of saying, ‘Didn’t your Mama teach you any manners?’

“I am sorry Mama,” Sam said realizing his infraction, but he was still panting. “I guess when it’s too hot like this, most people, like me, tend to forget their manners, throwing them to the wayside . . . If you know what I mean!”

“A simple greeting would have sufficed.”

“How are you *my* sweet lady, *our* lovely mother . . . protector of *our* stomachs?” Sam said playfully. She smiled gleefully exposing her gleam teeth.

“Now, you could help a lady with her load . . . won’t you, please?” Njoki said harshly, handing him the jerry can she carried in her right hand. She did not mean anything by her harshness.

“Without a doubt *sweet* mother,” Sam said as he reached out to help her.

“I knew you boys could use some water in this heat. Here!” she said softly offering Sam the Jerry-can. He took it without saying a

word. Mama Njoki lowered the load off her head and placed it on the ground. She thrust her hand inside the basket and fished out a mug, which she handed to him. Sam took it in silence; he filled it to its brim with the coveted drink and gulped it. He did not remove the mug to his lips until he had ingested its very last drop. He emitted a thunderous belch.

“Please forgive me!” he said apologetically. Mama Njoki simply looked at him with aghast filled eyes, shaking her head despondently.

“Kids these days are so ill-mannered!” she mumbled, though she was not surprised. After all, no human being can guzzle a cup full of water at once without belching—that would have been unnatural.

“Go tell the other boys to come for lunch,” Kamau commanded.

“No problem,” Sam said as he walked away heading towards the boys.

The heat was intense though the sky had a taint of blue with a profusion of mighty and ever-changing clouds that floated weightlessly above them.

Because the boys had no shed under which to sit, they prepared a spot where Koza had sat earlier on that morning. There, they spread empty cement bags, which left behind a swirling dust of ashen powder. When they were certain it was alright, they sat down in a circular formation. As Mama Njoki prepared to serve them, their tired hungry eyes watered—there is nothing as palatable as a smorgasbord of food when one is starving, and starving they were. Before them, she placed a mountain of *ugali*—big enough to feed a battalion—*sukuma wiki*, with beef. Yummy! So, there, under the sizzling sun, the boys hogged their food, hoping for the wind to hold up, lest it blow dust into their food. The boys ate and ate and ate to their satisfaction. In the end, they conceded that although Kamau was a slave driver, he knew how to pander to his employees through the power of a plate—this guaranteed good workmanship—and he valued good workmanship. After that, the boys worked tirelessly until the sun made its tumble into the hazy nightly sky.

By dusk, while the evening sun glided westward into the depth of sky, the landscape changed its color, the horizon taking on an orange glare of blue. Muted brown bodies of men, women, and children in a

single file descended the slopes of Maraba suburb. Their elongated shadows preceded them. Mothers, with heavy loads on their heads, walked with ease; while others, with infants tied behind their backs, simply lumbered along as though they were about to collapse under the yoke of their weight. Their feet dragged dust off the dry earth and nearly peeling off their toes, but that did not distract them at all. They plodded along determined to reach their destination in pronto. Young children clinging onto their mothers' hands struggled to keep pace. Weak ones dropped their exhausted bodies in the middle of the road, throwing temper tantrums, in compliant to their mothers' quest to tag along. Some of the mothers, aware of the day's end, kept their pace hoping the exhausted young ones would halt their foolishness, stand-up and catch-up to pace. Staggering drunken men straddled along the way, mumbling unintelligible words. *Mimi ni mlef i pwana. Unaangalia nini wewe mchinga?*¹⁴ *Pita kwenda buko, kumanina sako!* Boda Boda boys hauling unimaginable cargo peddled their bicycles and breaking wind like old tired donkeys forced to climb a hill. But Kamau and his crew struggled to wrap up their day's work. By the time the sun made its final descent into the depth of sky, the boys had wrapped up their day's work and were getting ready to return to their homes. They simply had a few hours ahead of them to rejuvenate their bodies before they returned the next day to their hard back-breaking job . . .

When Achaga and Sam returned home, the sun had long set. They did not have much to say to each other, not because they did not want to speak to one another, but because their bodies had been browbeaten by the sheer brutality of hard work. The kind of tiredness that forced men to wonder about life's injustice, of why some people were lucky enough to have been born with a silver spoon in their hands; or why others collapsed on a bed-bug ridden beds or slept on the floor with hardly any covers at all. Or why some men drove Mercedes-Benz cars, while others, unshod, walked on foot

¹⁴ Corrupted Swahili expression. 'I am a drunkard mister. What are you looking at you fool. Pass . . . some vulgarity!'

everywhere they went. Or why some wore expensive Bata shoes, while others, barefooted, suffered the indignity of jiggers, and with cracks on their heels deep enough to conceal a five shilling *kobole* coin. Or why some, the lucky few, feasted in luxury, while others were condemned to a lifetime of servitude, sleeping on an empty stomach, as though there was no God to see their plight. There were no easy answers for such thoughts . . .

No sooner had Sam set foot in the house than he nearly ripped his overalls off his body. He tossed them onto the couch and now his bed. Mindlessly, he dropped his tired body into the softness of the couch as it swallowed him in an instant. He closed his eyes, hoping to take a quick catnap. And for once, he longed for his grandmother's cooking . . .

Similarly, Achaga walked directly to his room. Sam could clearly hear him drop his body into the bed like a log. He sighed dispassionately. Sam did not need anyone to tell him how Achaga felt, for he, too, felt the same way—a broken beast of burden.

The boys did not move and neither did they speak to each other. Even when the sun's rays faded completely, they hardly noticed. Each one of them simply withdrew into his own world. They must have slept for what seemed like an hour, but ideally, it was three hours or so. For when Achaga emerged from his bedroom half-dressed and yawning, it was already night time, and the outside was pitch-black. They could hear faint voices of passersby as they walked hurriedly towards their homes. They could hear drunken men singing along the road; other times, they could not tell whether the men were going home or in search of another drinking den.

"Sam," Achaga said between his yawns. "We better get something to eat so we can go bed early."

"What time is it any way?"

"Am not sure."

"Turn on the radio then . . . that should clear that mystery!"

"It is probably 7:30," Achaga said as he withdrew back into his room only to reemerge with an old beat-up blue Sanyo radio. He switched the dial on, but it sounded so irritably noisy and fuzzy.

"Your batteries must be old!"

“No, with this radio, I have to find the right spot,” Achaga said, walking toward the window where he positioned its thin aerial on the inner fringe of the window. He toyed with the dial several times until the announcer’s voice cleared.

*Tunasikitika kutangaza kifo cha Mama Abigail Migide*¹⁵ . . . ’ the newscaster’s voice now bellowed loud and clear. The mystery of the time cleared immediately with that piece of news—the announcement of the dead.

“I told you it had to be about 7:30!” Achaga said braggingly. “I have a second sense about these things,” he added. But the truth of the matter was it was 9:30 p.m.

Achaga walked back to his room once more and returned with a lantern and a spotlight in his right hand. He flicked the switch of the spotlight to see. A bright beam of light showered the already darkened room. Pointing to the lantern, he noticed its glass was soot black.

“Sam!”

“What?”

“Why don’t you clean this while I prepare the stove?”

“No problem! Sam said, struggling to pry his body off his couch.

He handed Sam the lantern and walked into the kitchen where he stated rummaging through the pots and pans for leftover food from the previous night. Thank goodness they still had some. Achaga turned on the stove and started warming it.

Meantime, Sam cleaned the lantern thoroughly. When he was certain it was clean, he walked into the kitchen, took a matchbox, pulled out a match stick and struck it. It did not work the first time. He tried a second time, but only a whippy orange flame erupted and frizzled as quickly as it had come, leaving behind the smell of burning wood. He tried again and this time, it erupted into a bright orange flame. He cupped it with the palm of his left hand so it did not go off. Slowly, he moved it close to the lantern. He lifted its lever with his left hand and gently guided the flame onto the wick under the glass. The light was not instantaneous, but short blue flames started

¹⁵ It is with sadness that we announce the passing of Abigail Migide.

dancing at the tip of the wick and then eventually blossomed into an orange glow. Immediately, the room became engulfed in a dull shade of yellow as kerosene fumes filled the air. That night, when the food was ready, the boys ate in absolute quietness, only the occasional chirping sounds of crickets broke the sullenness of the room. After supper, they sat in silence as time crept on. The night was imperceptibly dark. And darkness brought with her the gift of silence allowing each man to reflect on his present state of life and the future, which was as bleak as the present. They remained in that state until they retired into their beds, anticipating another yet, hard-back-breaking day . . .

At dawn, with his eyes still clouded with sleep, Sam struggled to get out of bed. The night had definitely seemed much shorter than most nights, but he did not fuss much about it. He knew he had to get up; after all, there were many unemployed young men dying to have his job. Fighting against bad thoughts of staying in bed, he hopped out of his covers and dashed to the outhouse. He returned inside momentarily, grabbed a pail of ice-cold water and was out in a jiffy. Once in the bathroom, he took a quick bath, splashing water all over his body with his hands. His teeth chattered as cold water came in contact with his warm body. When he was done, he swiftly dried himself, got dressed, and returned to the house. Achaga had already prepared their tea and was hurriedly drinking his cup. No sooner had Sam returned, than it was Achaga's turn. He guzzled the last drop of his tea and with a quick dash to the outhouse and bathroom; he took a quick cold bath. When he returned into the house, Sam had finished his tea. Without wasting time, the boys were out of the house in pronto.

Once outside, the air was not only pitilessly raw and dripping, but also cold, bringing chills to their bodies. Even if the early Kakamega morning sun was beginning to creep slowly above the eastern horizon, it emitted no heat, save for an orange hue that glazed the horizon. All they could feel was a cool gentle breeze, making the morning even more frigid, the kind of chillness that would be soothing in the middle of the day. Hurriedly, the boys ascended the

steep embankment heading towards the town. To keep warm, Sam wrapped his hands around his body, but when that did not help; he untangled his hands and started rubbing them together. Conceding defeat, he gave-up the process altogether, knowing full well that he would keep warm no sooner he got to work.

They were among the first people to arrive at the construction site. Koza had preceded them and was busy organizing work equipment, and that was his nature. He was the first one to arrive and the last to leave. From the look of things, their day was destined to be even much harder than the previous one. The construction work for the day of erecting the walls of the building was enormous . . . That took precision and exactitude. They ensured the walls were strong enough to withstand any shifting movement of the earth's tectonic plate, rain, or any other calamity Mother Nature brought her way. The only thing they could not protect it from was man's ferocity. So they went to work right away, of hauling wheelbarrows of sand, of sieving sand, of hauling bags of cement, of fetching water, of mixing concrete. Oh boy! They did it all respectfully like programmed robots. The chills Sam had experienced on his way to work vanished without notice that he even coveted it. By noon, Mama Njoki brought them their lunch. She was as prompt as she had been the previous day and the next day and the day after and the week after that and the month after that. The boys acknowledged her tenacity and punctuality. Her food was delicious as always. After lunch, the boys returned to working and, in this manner, they established a routine for their days. Before sun-up, the boys came in every morning at the same time every day, every week, and every month for the next six months. They ended their shift every evening at the same time, only to return home at sunset, mingling among a throng of homebound market goers and traders. That was before they started putting final touches on their gargantuan structure, of installing its glass windows, or painting its walls. When the gigantic house was completed, it was a coveted structure in the entire Maraba suburb and neighboring villages. It became a landmark, not because of its sheer size, but the boldness of colors the crew had used in its

painting—bold blue and edged with black trimmings. When it crumpled years later, it was and still is the talk of town to this day . . .

Months after his arrival in Kakamega, Sam met Wanjia, the woman who would later become the love of his life and still remains. He met her at the most unusual time and place. It was not in a bar like he had met Nekesa. He was not inebriated, which happened a lot following his expulsion from Bumbi Polytechnic. He met her accidentally in a maize field. It was one beautiful Saturday morning when he had gone to help Furaha, his half-sister, in a nearby village to harvest her maize, an odious job that lasted an entire day. He had spotted her as she wrestled to pull an ear of corn off its unyielding husk. Her ebony skin glittered under the sweltering sun. That was attractive. She did not notice him gawking at her as she wiped the sweat off her gleaming brow. An occasional cool drifting wind passed, soothing her sweaty brow. She wiped her wet hands on her bottom.

Though Sam was attracted to the girl, he recalled how he had been beguiled by Nekesa. And as a sage might say: ‘Once bitten, twice a fool.’ Sam had been bitten numerous times than he cared to remember. He had even vowed never to make a fool of himself ever again . . . *in his life*. Sam kept his vow. That was before his eyes landed on Wanjia. She was such a beauty—a short rotund sweet and charming lady, with an impeccable smile. Each moment he got, he stole calculated glances at her. What man could resist such a beauty? He resolved not to pursue her, but simply admire her from a far. Neither did she make any effort to meet nor make his acquaintance. She smiled suggestively at him whenever their eyes chanced to meet. Had she been a pale looking woman, one would have seen her blush; fortunately, for her, her skin was as dark as the ebony wood. By the day’s end, nothing happened between the two; each went his or separate way; yet, Cupid’s arrow had already pierced Sam’s heart.

When Sam returned home and told Achaga about the girl, he said he had never met or heard of her. “She must be a very special girl,”

Achaga said. Sam nodded his agreement. There was no more conversation about the girl.

That night, when Sam went to bed, he barely slept. He tossed and turned in his bed thinking about her again and again and again; while outside, the sounds of chirping crickets filled the air. Numerous frogs, too, were croaking. 'What nonsensical creatures!' he mumbled. He ignored these sounds as his mind drifted back and forth from the girl to Nekesa, the very woman who had broken his heart. He remembered a vow he had made a couple of years ago: 'I'll never fall in love with a woman again.' That was a foolish promise! It made him conflicted about his new love interest.

'Women, you can't live without them!' he gasped. No matter how much he tried to forget the young lady, her figure remained an enigma too hard to ignore. He kept on seeing images of her delicate hands as she wrestled with a corn husk, or as she struggled to pull-out the corn. He wished he could have gone to her, touched those hands, caressed them gently or shielded them from being scratched by the sharpened edges of corn-leaves. Once, he noticed her licking one of her fingers. What a pity! He knew what had happened! She must have had a cut . . . the most painful thing to happen when harvesting corn. The girl cocked her head in Sam's direction as she made her final lick. Sam's heart missed a beating, but he dismissed it as triviality. Other times, Sam kept on seeing the bright glitter of her eyes whenever she subtly looked his way. When their eyes chanced to meet, his heart missed a beat, again and again and again. And the smiles upon her face . . . Yes! That smile was radiant. Although he wanted to go to her, make small talk, he restrained himself, remembering his vow. Now, as he lay on his bed, he hated himself for following reason instead of his emotions. Sadly, too, he did not know her name. It was best that way. Anonymity was noble, or was it?

Sam was in love. That was a fact. He knew and understood that love was irrational. That was a fact. It made men mad. That was another fact. It made women mad. That, too, was a fact. It made Sam mad. That, too, was true. So, he tossed and turned in his bed, but his eyes remained wide open, staring into darkness. Suddenly, he heard

soft thin pin-like droplets fall on the rooftop of his house. At first, he could not tell what they were; perhaps a night runner throwing sand on his rooftop. Then, the once sporadic droplets picked the pace as they pattered violently on the rooftop like a series of hammer strokes. This went on for a very long time, providing him a temporary distraction from his floundering thoughts of a girl he had met, but did not even know her name. Then, through a tiny crack in his room, he saw a dry crack of lightning split the darkness. A thunderous rumble followed, and a cold shiver ran down his spine. He was afraid of the dangers that accompanied such a rumble. And he had just cause to be afraid, for he had long forgotten images of the day he was struck by lightning. His grandmother and Ajema, his aunt, were in the kitchen, at the time, preparing supper. He remembered how he nearly died when a bolt struck him. It uprooted him from a chair and tossed him up in the air several yards away. He was still a young boy, about ten years or so. He remembered the force with which his body had been slammed against the wall, landing on the floor with an awful bang as though his body had been feather light. The pain that followed was insurmountable. The terror in his grandmother's deafening scream came back to him so vividly that he could still hear it in his mind's eye. He lost his consciousness. Poor woman! There was nothing she could do to save him, but pray, even though he was not hers to save. He belonged to Him who was mightier than her. And if He decided it was his time to join the spirit world, it was destined to happen. Even with her fears, she hopped to her feet in a mad fury, dashed to her grandson's body sprawled across the floor and began to resuscitate him. But he remained as stiff as a log, exhibiting no sign of life. When he finally opened his eyes, she hugged him dearly, thanking the Almighty for the miracle of life. Her grandchild escaped the clutches of death . . . What a gift!

As these things flashed on Sam's mind, another flashing light passed, followed by a dull rumble. Sam forced his eyes shut, and lulling himself to sleep with sweet thoughts of the strange woman he had seen at his sister's home. He resolved that when daybreak came, he would begin his quest to find the girl.

That night, Sam had a tumultuous sleep. He had a vivid dream of an ebony face of a girl watching him. The face shot-up amid a thicket of an expansive cornfield that stretched out like a sea and fell to the furthest horizon. The face was shiny black and radiated under the blazing heat of the Kakamega sun. His eyes settled on her eyes and penetrated deep through hers, as though she were the very embodiment of innocence. Two unflinching rings of pure white surrounding two circles of intense black gazed into his eyes. Strange pleasurable warmth crept all over his body that it shuddered. He could not explain this strangeness. Suddenly, he felt like a boy, a young boy, infatuated with something wonderful and magical for the first time. Thrilled, he felt like leaping with joy toward the face—a formless face—and wrap it into a tender embrace, but the two dark rings, surrounded by pure circles of white held him captive, and he could not move. Then, weakly, he lifted his right hand, hoping to reach out and touch her—the face—but it was too far and his hand fell short, just as the lips on the face curled up in a half smile. The twinkle in the eyes made his heart grow wild. And as quickly as the head had popped up, it vanished below the stalks of corn; it was as though the face had been a phantom. The dream deceived him. What an ornery dream!

‘Don’t gooooo,’ he mumbled, but it was too late! The face was no more.

“No, No Nooooo,” he yelled as he jerked his body violently. Then he felt some external pressure over his body.

“Wake-up! Wake-up!” It was Achaga reeling his friend back from a bad dream.

Weeks came and passed, but Sam had no way of tracking the girl. Even though he had hoped to accidentally bump into her, it never happened! A chance meeting spoke to his lifelong motto: What was destined to be always come to pass. Unfortunately for Sam, nothing seemed to work. Perhaps, the strange girl was not in his destiny. His destiny worked counter to his heart's desire. So he waited and kept on hoping that one day . . . Only one day she would fall into his lap. That was before he paid his sister Furaha a visit.

The day of his the visit to Furaha's home, turned out to be the most shocking. He did not anticipate it. Yes! It was a shock of a life time alright. He had plenty to talk to her about—their childhood life at the Old Man's home—from how they teased each other in their formative years, fought over food, or acted plainly foolish. Or how they painted each other's her face with soot, a foolish bet that tested each other's tenacity. Whoever stayed awake longer painted the other's face. It was a fun foolish childish prank. Furaha always lost such a bet. So Sam was looking forward to another enjoyable afternoon with his sister . . . And he did get a lion's share of a delightful afternoon.

As he approached her door, he smiled mischievous as a sinister thought crept on his mind. *'What if I played a prank on her? Won't it be fun to see her frightened face? What a fantastic idea!'* he mumbled to himself as he drew closer to her door—just inches from it. The truth about the matter was: His very visit was in deed a surprise. He did not tell her about it. He followed a Logooli rule of thumb that one does not need special notification to pay a relative a visit, especially if the one being visited was a sibling. One simply showed up, and showing-up he had. His plan was simple: He would growl at Furaha the moment she opened the door at his knocking. *'The shock on her face will be dynamite!'* he mumbled. He knew Furaha hated pranks, and that is what made it enticing. He smiled at the thought of seeing her jump-

up in fright. *'What if she had a pot in her hand? What then?'* a grin appeared on his face. He did not have to speculate more on that—he knew what would happen. This was a kind of prank he used to play on her in their formative years. He remembered another time he had frightened her. They were in the kitchen making tea, and Furaha was busy tending to the fire. By her side, she had an open jar of milk. Seizing the moment, Sam began slurping his chops, as though he were a cat lapping milk. *"Furaha look! The cat is drinking milk!"* Startled and in haste, Furaha turned in the direction of the sound as her hand slipped off one of the stones of her stove nearly burning herself. There was no cat. Sam balled-up into laughter until tears came out of his eyes. *'That was very funny,'* he thought. *'Yes indeed! It was very funny.'* He resolved to scare her one more time.

He approached Furaha's steps with a grin on his face. He moved his right foot forward onto the first step. He stopped abruptly to listen. He did not hear any sound from inside. He straightened himself-up, rolled his shoulders, and then lugged his left foot onto the next step. Once again, he paused momentarily, but all was still. He moved his right foot onto the next step followed by the left. He stopped again. One more step towards the door and that was it. He paused for the final time. Right foot forward, left foot forward, and he was at the door. He straightened himself again. The look of mischief crept over his mind once more as he moved his right hand slowly to tap at the door. He could not help, but feel giddy inside. *'What a fantastic picturesque moment it will be!'* He imagined the fear factor on his sister's face; the kind of scare that would make her jumpy. *'Beautiful! Just beautiful!'*

With the slowness of man who knew what he was about to do, he gently tapped the door. Nothing happened. He tapped it a second time. Still, nothing happened, or rather, no one made an appearance at the door. And that was a bad sign. The hidden joy he had hoped to experience began to fade. *'What if she was not there?'* he wondered. Then what? All his moments of planning was all for nothing? He did not think about this minor detail . . . That his sister might not be at home at his arrival. He was certain she would be there. *'Of course she couldn't have gone anywhere. Or could she?'* he wondered again. For a while,

it appeared the prank was on him. He tapped on the door for the third time. Nothing happened. Not even a sound could be heard. He moved his ear to the door and pinned it on the hard wooden surface. The door felt hot, but there was no sound, hardly any sound. ‘*Rats!*’ he mumbled in frustration. He tapped on the door a fourth time—and he had resolved it would be his last. He pressed his ear on the wooden door again. This time, he heard movement from inside; light footsteps were approaching the door . . . almost in tip-toe. ‘*Phew!*’ He heaved a sigh of relief. The joy of hearing the footsteps nearly made him forget his planned prank against his sister. Soundlessly, he cleared his throat and shifted his body. Standing in an erect position, he started brushing his hair backwards with his bare palms. He licked his lips as a mischievous grin, once more, appeared upon his face. He was so consumed with himself that he did not hear the latch of the door click. But when the door fell open, he received the shock of his life!

It was not Furaha standing behind the door. It was not his brother-in-law. It was not his nephew. It was a beautiful woman. The very woman he had seen in Furaha’s maize plantation. The sight of the woman made him forget his plan. Right away, his plan fell through the cracks! She was a petite woman, but not too short. Her ebony skin shone brilliant and her face was as smooth as a baby’s bottom. She was wearing this beautiful floral *kitenge* that seemed to have been perfectly fitted on her body. Her eyes were bright and glittered behind their eyelids. As he looked into them, they seemed to penetrate deep into his heart. Shocked, Sam lost all his speech as his lips gaped at the sides. He was like a stupefied baboon as his eyes gawked wide at her. To say he was smitten by her beauty would be an understatement. Like Sam, the young lady simply gazed at him. She neither moved nor muttered a word. What a fantastic picturesque sight, a far much superb spectacle than Sam’s planned prankish stunt for Furaha.

“Wanja! Who is it?” came a voice from the back.

“I don’t know!” she said. She was right, she did not *know* him.

“I’ll be right there!” the voice came again.

“Won’t you come in?” Wanja said.

“Of course yes!” Sam said still gawking at the girl and almost tripping on the ledge of her door. As he walked in, he maintained his gaze of the woman, as though afraid she might vanish. The girl pushed the door shut behind her. There was a soft clicking sound as the latch fell into place. Immediately, the room became engulfed in darkness, save for the streak of light that came in through a tiny window. The air was warm, but soothing.

No sooner had he set foot in the door than in walked his sister.

“Oh! It is you!” Furaha said happy to see him.

“Were you expecting someone else?” Sam said.

“No. But I wasn’t expecting you for sure.”

The siblings exchanged a meaningful glance.

“That is alright. I just thought it might be nice to visit my little sister for a change,” Sam added.

“Sam!” Furaha said. Then she fell silent. Her eyes glossed over her brother and then to Wanja. The girl seemed petrified.

“This is Wanja . . . Wanja Wainaina,” Furaha said with ease and pointing at the woman as a way of introduction. She nodded, but remained soundless. She stared at Sam, just as he did her. There was a hint of recognition in their eyes.

“Have you two met?” Furaha asked in confusion.

“I believe we have!” Sam said. “It was several months ago, not formally though. Remember when you were harvesting your corn?”

“Oh, I see,” Furaha said.

“It is a pleasure to finally meet you, *formally* . . . I mean,” Wanja said shaking Sam’s hand.

“The pleasure is all mine!” Sam said, his destiny coming to fruition.

From that day onward, Sam and Wanja were like two kindred spirits destined to be together for as long as they lived. Wanja was a more sensible and attractive woman he had ever seen. She was a short, stout, ebony skinned woman, with long dark wavy hair easily mistaken for a wig. She had simply been lucky enough to have been born with long thick black hair, which she never braided like most girls from her village. She kept it neatly tied in a thick ponytail, exposing her round facial features. Whether smiling or not, she was

pleasant, for her face was ever radiant and her eyes, ever smiling as though nothing in the world rattled her. That was why Sam found her irresistible from the moment he laid his eyes on her. She, too, found him charming in a devastating way; there was something in his eyes that drew her to him, something innately special. Even their ethnicities, which were as dissimilar as their social backgrounds, alone could not deter Sam from staking a claim on his find. Neither could she find reason enough not to be eclipsed in his shadow.

Wanja was a Kakamega born Kikuyu and was from an affluent family, while Sam . . . Well, you know his story—he was close to a being a vagrant. And to mention his ethnicity here seemed problematic—though some would claim him to be Mlogooli. He did not know what he was or who he was. He only knew he lived with the Old Man. That was all there was to it. Their ethnicities were not only uncommon between them, but they spoke two different languages. Yet, what bonded them as a couple was stronger than what separated them—their love for one another. Their love for humanity was greater than any illicit drug known to humankind. Love, which quickly ignites a tender heart, found its way into their midst, sealing their destinies . . . A match sanctioned by a superior force. Lulled by its sweetness, which made the air light, the two walked together like somnambulists. Soon, Sam had no choice, but move into his own flat. He needed his privacy, just as much as Achaga did. That was not the only change Sam made. He and Wanja each purchased a cell phone, which they used to communicate with each another. Whenever they were not together, they texted each other. They texted each other to set up their dates, which became as frequent as their daily chats.

“*Nijae bibiye*—what’s up miss?” Sam would text her if he wanted to see her.

“*Fit sana mazee—Very fit mister?*” she would text him right back.

“*Uko na time tu meet*—You have any time to meet?”

“*Sivezi leo bwana*—Not today!” she would respond.

“*Mbona*—Why?”

“*Wazee wamenikalia vigumu*—my parents won’t let me!”

Unable to make her acquaintance for the day, he would text her back, “*Baadaye bibiye, ingawa roho inakutamani*—later, even though my heart yearns for you!”

“Okay, *baadaye!*¹⁶” she would fire back.

Other times, just to steal a peek at her, Sam would go to her parents’ shop and, if he found her father there, he would pretend he wanted to buy something he knew they never carried. If she were in the shop, he would wink at her suggestively. Feeling shy and embarrassed, she would lower her head. Sam would imagine hearing her heart ticking like a clock—tick-tock. Tick-tock.

Soon, they became dedicated to one another. They met accidentally. They planned their meetings. Unfortunately, their devotion to one another did not prepare them for the challenges they would face several years following their first meeting; and they did face significant trials . . .

¹⁶ Later.

One evening, when the sun had gone down and bad weather had stormed the seasons out of order, Achaga, Sam's friend, staggered into his home. That day, Wanja had come to visit Sam, and the couple was sitting in the living room in silence listening to the *pitter-patter* sounds of the rain as it pounded hard on every roof, every pane, and every door, enough to make a brave hearted man cow in cowardice from walking outside. It rained all afternoon and Mother Earth was, surely, receiving her unwarranted punishment from the Almighty. Occasionally, bursts of heavy winds passed followed by a calming drizzle. Then another spell of a thunderous stormy rain pounded earth again and again and again. This pattern of rain and wind went on for a while, long enough to down weakened trees. There were puddles of rain everywhere. So, when Achaga stumbled into Sam's flat, he was drenched and shivery. His bare feet were wet, and his skin had pruned-up. He looked exhausted and dishevelled. His clothes were not only soiled, but also wrinkled as though he had slept in a trench. His breathe smelt of nothing more, but booze. The man had come to see Sam on a matter he deemed of utmost urgency, seeing how he had braved the rain.

As soon as he had set foot into the house, they shook hands as customary. Because he was drenched, Sam vanished to his bedroom only to re-emerge with some dry clothes for his old friend to wear, for the two were like brothers. They had grown together, played together in Mung'oma Caves, attended the same primary school, and had, one might add, had a bad life. Both Achaga's parents perished in a road crash when he was only twelve. It was as though bad karma followed them wherever they traversed.

After he had changed his clothes, Sam offered him a seat, while Wanja went to make a steaming cup of tea for him. As Wanja withdrew from the living room into the kitchen to start a fire, the two men had time reminisce over village gossip.

Once Wanja was out of earshot, Achaga did not hesitate, but jumped onto the opportunity in pronto. It was clear from his twinkling eyes that he had an urgent message.

"My friend! My friend!" he started to speak, with a slur in his voice.

"Yes Achaga!" Sam said.

"The things that I hear these days are very strange."

"What has happened? Sam asked.

"I am hear-r-ring that . . ." Achaga paused for a second trying to collect himself. "I wa-wa-nt you to tell me the truth. Me, Achaga. I want you to tell me the real truth," he said with his head cocked to the side and as he poked himself on his chest.

"What things are you hearing my friend?"

"Tell me it is not true!"

"What is not true?"

"Tell me. Me, Achaga your friend that it is not true that . . ."

"What?" Sam said starting to get irritated.

"That what people are saying is not true!" he said frothing at the mouth.

"Will you please get to the point?"

"I hear you are planning to marry Wanja!" he paused for a second, wiping froth from his mouth. "Is that not true?"

"Is there anything wrong with me marrying her?"

"Sam! Sam! Is that a question for you of all people to ask me?"

"Is there anything wrong with me marrying her?" Sam said again, this time, straight faced and cocking his eyebrows questioningly.

"If you don't see anything the matter, let me spell it out for you!"

"She is Kikuyu and you . . . and you are Mlogooli. That's all there is to it," he said hesitantly.

"I don't get your drift!"

"I thought you knew all along that marrying *these people* is wrong, just purely wrong?"

"These *people!* These *people!*" Sam said with an agitated fury. They are Kenyans just like you and I."

"Aaha!"

"*These people* are just like you and me. They are not any different. They have a mother like you do. They have a father like you do. They are normal functional human beings like you. They eat. They go to the bathroom. They breathe. They sleep. They become ill, just like any mortal. They die, just like any mortal. They are buried just like most human beings."

"Don't get technical with me *bwana*! I beg to differ, my friend! They may be human like us, but they are not like us. Their customs are different from ours. Their beliefs are different from ours. Even some of their foods are different from ours—think of *mokimo* or *irio*, which Mlogooli would like that? Just think about it. Conversely, if you do not believe me, ask her to eat *ziswa*, see what she will tell you . . . What more do you want me to tell you?"

"If this is your attitude, there is nothing more I can say to you. After all, *friend*, that is not your problem, is it?"

"Probably not, but you are my dear brother and friend. And that my friend . . . That makes it my problem!"

"I see!"

"And let me tell you something!"

"What? Haven't you said enough?"

"No! And I won't leave until I say my peace. When you get into problems do you know who will be on your side?" Achaga said, lacking in reticence. "Do you know who will come to your aid?"

"Oh! Let me make a wild guess . . . *You*!"

"You got that right!" he said, not paying attention to the sarcasm in Sam's voice.

"Alright then, tell me what you want before I change my mind. No, before I drag you out of my house." For a single moment, silence crept between them save for the rains of despair that continued to pound hard on the rooftop. "A man might refuse to do as he is told," he continued "but he does not refuse to listen That is what our people always say. Please, say your peace, really. Mind you, make it quick because my patience is beginning to wean off."

"Do you remember what happened to Kadenge?"

"What does Kadenge's story have to do with me?"

“Because he *married* a Kikuyu woman when he was working in Nairobi just a little over seven years ago. People still talk about him till this day.”

“I see!”

“When they first met, the woman was as meek as a lamb.”

“That is what I heard.”

“But that meekness did not last long.”

“I don’t recollect those details.”

“Here is another one . . . Do you know Kadenge was married before left home?” Sam nodded.

“He and his wife had four children.”

“Yes, indeed, they had!”

“He promised to find a job in the big city so as to support his family. That was what most young people were doing back then. He promised to come for them once he settled. All seemed settled! So he left. When he found his job, he did not forget his obligations. He sent his wife money regularly. Whenever he chanced to find time off, he returned home to see his family. That went on for a while, about six months, if I remember correctly. That was before he met Jane Waithera.”

“Ahaaa!”

“I had forgotten all about that,” Sam said.

“She was one beautiful woman . . . Brown skinned, sweet and cheeky; the kind of woman men found hard to resist . . . And Kedenge found her very irresistible. Soon she became the elixir of his life, the Jezebel who stole his heart. No sooner had they become bed-fellows than he forgot all about his first wife. The woman moved in with him and treated him like a king—imagine she would buy a kilo of beef and prepare it, especially for him, *nyama choma* and *ugali*, something his wife could barely afford, and even if she bought meat, he had plenty of competition—his children. Waithera stroked his ego in ways his wife could not. “You are so nice and loving . . . Oh! You are so charming. Where were you hiding all these years? You have such a strong arm and your smile aah, aah, charming, and it drives me crazy. You devil you!” She would tell him regularly. He became beguiled. Soon, his wife became a relic from a past not worthy of

remembrance. When Waithera conceived, the fate of Kadenge's first wife was sealed. It did not take long for her to convince him to buy her a piece of land in the Schemes near Stendi Mawe. It did not take him long to build her a new home there. He put the title deed of his property in the woman's name. "You are precious. Oh dear, how charming my darling . . . how caring! You are the most amazing man!" It did not take long for the sweet grapes of love to turn sour—turn into the grapes of wrath. No sooner had he sold his heart to her than he learned that his new common-law wife was not whom he thought she was. She had been married previously. To add insult to injury, she had big children—they were three boys. Devastated with the news, the man nearly lost his mind . . . though he had lost it long time ago . . . when he abandoned his wife. Waithera was no longer his sweet honey. She transformed herself overnight into a mean-spirited-wench. If only he had known, if only he had known, but it was too late for regrets . . . Before long, the boys became men, and they drove the man empty handed out of his home, which they claimed belonged to their mother . . . The man was left with nothing, save for the clothes on his back. The woman seized everything—his land and house. She even denied him his own daughter, his flesh and blood, imagine that! Everything in his life was turned topsy-turvy. Out of shame, he hanged himself.

"So? I still don't see how that has any bearing to me!"

"My friend, if anything happens to you . . . Well, since you are so set on marrying this woman, don't say I did not warn you."

"Thank you for your concern!"

"I have said my peace. And as our people always say, you can take a cow to the river, but you cannot force it to drink . . . I shall take my leave now!"

"But Wanja is preparing tea for . . ."

"Give her my apologies my friend. Tomorrow is another day."

With his peace said, Achaga staggered out into the rain like a man already accustomed to it, but his heart was heavy with sorrow. Sam watched him until he vanished, or had become one with the rain. Once alone, he sighed despondently, cognisant that he had abandoned reason for love. No mortal could have convinced him

otherwise. He loved Wanja and that was all there was to it. He turned a deaf ear to his friend's counsel. Perhaps, the old quintessential sage was right: love is blind. It touches the most irrational essence of humankind, and Sam was touched.

A couple of months after Achaga's warning, Sam married Wanja. The night before his wedding, Sam barely slept. His mind was disarrayed and his heart in tumult. He knew he had a monstrous day ahead come morning. It was much grander than when he had left home for the first time to attend Bumble Polytechnic. It was even much more monumental than when he was handed his expulsion papers from the Polytechnic. Certainly, he knew, after what had seemed like the longest two years of his life, he was going to make Wanja a respectable woman. Henceforth, every morning when the sun peaks up in the eastern hemisphere or sets on his tranquil suburb of Maraba, she would forever be by his side. Just the thought of it made his body puckered with goose bumps even though it was already eighty-five inside. Hope, anticipation, and anxiety were his culprits.

By daybreak, when the sun had spread its orange glow over Maraba treetops, Sam woke-up to a fresh dawn. His long-awaited moment had dawned. Instead of hopping out of bed like a man who had plenty to do in his day, he slowly dragged his feet out of his covers and planted them on the floor. He scooted his bottom onto the edge of his bed and, with his hands crisscrossed; he sat there in deep thought. Nerves made his head throb in pain. Nervousness also made his stomach run. He scurried off to the bathroom, only to return to his bedroom moments later.

He resumed his original posture—sitting at the edge of his bed with his feet firmly planted onto the floor. This time, his left hand was tucked under his right elbow with the palm of his right hand supporting his chin. Just for a twinkling, he contemplated calling the whole thing off. Then, he mulled over his present life. 'Not bad at all for a man, who had no clear understanding of family,' he mumbled to himself, as long as Wanja was in it. Then, his thoughts took flight to his formative years. That was a tumultuous time of his life, the loneliest period he had ever experienced. It was a past worth

forgetting and forgetting he must if he wanted to forge a peaceful future. The words ‘To hell with it!’ softly seeped off his lips. ‘To hell with it!’ he said again. His body twitched violently at this thought. Convinced that a life with Wanja was all worth his while, he added, ‘She is all I need. Hadn’t she made me a happy man and whole? What more could I ask of another human being?’ He also reflected on what Achaga had told him not long ago. ‘Yes! Achaga made a lot of sense,’ he debated. ‘But was he right? Can one be wrong on such matters? What if he was wrong? What then?’ he pondered this issue for a while. He had to be sure. No woman wants to get married only to realize she made a mistake. No man either desires to have a failed marriage.

The agitation of Sam’s inner struggle was justifiable. Though it was worth noting that he knew he could not stereotype people. Stereotyping was bad, no matter how one looked at. Wanja was sweet, humble, and honest. She was much more human than his own mother who had abandoned him in his formative years. She was much more human than his father who was the worst one among his sorry lot. So marrying Wanja felt right and bona fide. ‘Yes! I shall marry her today!’ he said it with astuteness. ‘She will be *mine*—Jane Wanja Adooli,’ he said with a smile, his eyes widening like dark coals and his mouth falling open.

Having made his decision to marry, hope and anticipation swooped at him. By then, the sun was a blaze with reds, purples, pinks and orange—a gorgeous day. Hurriedly, Sam dashed into the bathroom for a quick wash. He got dressed expeditiously and dashed out of the house to find Wanja, who had spent a night at her parents’ home. There was no wasting time. When he arrived to her home, which was only a block from where he lived, she was ready. It was as though she had been anticipating him the entire morning. When his eyes fell upon her, yet again, and hers upon him, they blazed with a mad passion. There was a sparkling light in Sam’s eyes. Right then, he knew he had made the right choice. There were no words to explain the joy they felt for one another. The trajectory of their lustful love propelled this major transition of their lives—marriage; there were no words a man or woman could say to keep them asunder, except for

death. Only that there was one minor thing they had inadvertently ignored. Perhaps, they had not ignored it at all . . . Their day was devoid of all festivities that accompany such occasions. They did not involve their families—the Old Man and his wife, and Wanja’s family was not in attendance. They did not have money to throw an extravagant wedding. Because of this limitation, they did not have a formal wedding like most people did. There was no cake to mark the occasion. There were no wedding rings exchanged. They did not exchange vows like most couples. Theirs was simple. The couple had simply gone to a judge who married them off. There was no honeymoon. Material things were unimportant. Salient to them was the truth that they were laying their lives aside for one another, an act of self-sacrifice, with Wanja giving-up the security of her family and Sam clinging to the illusion of a family he had coveted from his formative years. They reasoned that it was their choice to be together, and the two *lived* happily ever after . . . That was before the fracas of December 2007 and 2008. Until then, Sam had never second guessed his decision, but all that changed when his life turned topsy-turvy.

Part Three

The towering Eagle of the Lake Basin mourns,
A corollary to a disputed election!
In the wake of its madness,
Its pauperized populace—young and old,
Lulled by the illusion of democracy,
Strove in droves in the early hours of dawn,
casting their votes,
An ultimate participatory act in democracy!

That was yesterday!

Today, the country bleeds—
Its citizenry fall daily,
Like ants at a spray of Doom,
Catapulted to a dungeon of no return!
Their streams of blood dripping—
Drop! Drop! Drop!
Baptize the land in the name of freedom.
Their unseeing eyes full of the ocean—
Their hungry eyes filled with sadness—
Their red hot eyes filled with wrath wonder:
‘What will become of us?’

For years, Sam and Wanja continued to live in Maraba suburb. Sam still worked for Kamau, while Wanja owned a small vegetable stall. The suburb was a diverse community, with many of its residents as newcomers to the region. They came from various provinces: East, south, north, and even central. They were lured to the suburb for its plush vegetation good for growing crops and lived together harmoniously, regardless of their ethnicity. That was not the only attraction. Kakamega town itself was ripe for commercial business, especially after the opening of the University. Life was simple and inviting, but that was before the clashes happened. After that, people's lives became a living hell.

Newcomers were integrated into the communal life of the area. They provided employment to the youth. Some were teachers. There was Mrs. Wanjogu, who was a high school teacher and a successful business woman. She owned several *matatu* vans and a shop in town. She was a good employer of many local boys—turn-boys, drivers—and her contributions to the economy of the town were enormous. They were church going. They were ministers. They were carpenters. They worked in construction like Kamau.

Then, there was Tharau—a man whom most people hardly knew his last name. He was an astute businessman and owner of both commercial and residential properties. He, too, like Mrs. Wanjogu, hired many young men—particularly those who worked in construction. Even Sam had once worked on his property when he first moved to town. His foreman was Mr. Kamau, who was also resident within the area. He lived with his family—wife and children, and his brother Koza, who was Sam's friend. Koza was not his real name, but those who knew him only knew him by his nick name. Koza worked alongside his brother in construction. His father was a priest in the Anglican Church in Vihiga district. As a clergyman, he served the spiritual needs of the people. There was Julius Machoka, a

Kisii man, just next to Maraba Primary who had erected one of the first tall buildings within the area. His was a place where people who worked in town rented. Some of his other tenants were university students. Another Kisii family, the Moraa's, lived not very far from the school; they did not own much save for a home and *posho* mill. Most people processed their flour in the *posho* mill.

Then, there was Okoth, a Luo man. He was probably in his early eighties, but still very strong. He owned a shop right at the corner of the school and had rented portions of it to those who needed it for commercial purposes. There was a health clinic in his building, the only one in Maraba. He was the most religious man in the area—rumour had it that he saved Sam from attack by marauding thugs. He was married and lived with his wife of many years behind his shop. She, too, was saintly. His brother, who was slightly younger than him, did not live very far from him. He was a typical embodiment of a Luo man, a well groomed fellow. He was smart, clean-shaven and his hair was always neatly trimmed and combed. He put many young men to shame—one wonders how he looked when he was still young. Every morning, he loitered in the suburb, not looking for anything in particular. Perhaps, he was a lady's man. Then, there was Harry Harry, and many others who will remain unknown. These people were the bedrock of Maraba suburb.

Sam and Wanja lived happily together in the suburb. They complemented each other. Their love was pure and genuine, destined to stand the test of time, a reminder to Sam that he had made the right choice. Had he listened to his friend Achaga, he would have forever regretted his decision. Nevertheless, like all good things, Sam's undying love for his wife soon became tested on December 27, 2007. This was the day tumult ensued in the country. Everything in Maraba suburb changed overnight, not just for Sam, but most inhabitants. It was a time of grand civil utmost unrest.

Unlike a coveted joy that comes after an election won—of an unfettered jubilation—a gargantuan chaos broke following Kenya's disputed 'democratic' elections. And so it was: 'Man for himself and God for us all! But what God? Humankind knew not the mercy of God! Even brave men cringed in despair and weak ones collapsed

under duress. Children realized, with dismay, their parents' vulnerabilities. For the chasm of unfurled mayhem had descended upon them like a hurricane, destroying anything that traversed its path—living things, non-living things, young and old—anything, indiscriminately, succumbed to its mighty force. Be it day or night, the ugliness of danger loomed. When the red sun dipped behind the clouds, ushering in darkness against the starry sky, danger remained for everyone in the nation, and, particularly, in Maraba suburb. Hushed whispers of terror were heard from every corner. Men and young adults huddled in clusters and spoke in hushed murmurs afraid their voices might beckon further evil in their midst. Even though it was already there—teasing and nudging at their brains to do the unthinkable—against their conscience, their memory's past. Women found temporary comfort with each other and in their homes. They were afraid to set foot outside lest they become victims. Were they right in their resolve? For some, their homes already became their graveyard, a sizzling pyre. When the sun peeked at dawn, it was as bloody in its rising as it was in its setting, and the afternoon was oppressively hot . . .

There was nothing particularly unusual about Friday December 27, 2007. For Wanja, her day began like any other. She, like any market goers, left her home at her usual time. That was routine. *Matatu* drivers began their morning at dawn. That was routine. They transported traders to the market. That was routine. Sam, like most handy men who worked in construction, left home before sun-up. That was routine. Wanja had left home early to purchase fresh produce. And that, too, was routine.

At work, Sam and his co-workers, like most people in the nation, went about their lives, while they awaited the results of the election. That was ordinary and expected. All day long, they did not work very hard. That was not routine. Their thoughts were distracted. Occasionally, they loitered aimlessly in wait. That was not routine. Even Kamau, the foreman, was lax in his demands of his workers. He did not enforce hard labour. That was an anomaly. He let the men take time in completing their tasks. The sun was sizzling hot and the air and aura around them was thick, filled with unwarranted whispers. That was not a norm. Soon, rumours started spreading about vote rigging. That was not unusual. Vote rigging was normalcy. People became nervous. That was unusual. Before long, the men broke into groups along ethnic lines: Kikuyus and the rest. Kamau belonged to one camp and Sam the other. And *this* was an unusual among these men. In every cluster, the men spoke in whispers. When lunch time came and Mama Njoki brought their lunch, they ate in silence. That was not the norm. There was no joking around. No one mentioned the election, even if they were thinking about it. It was the fattest elephant in their midst. Out of fear of offending one another, they turned their eyes away from each other. That never happened before. By the day's end—which was about 6:30 p.m.—they all packed their tools. There was no mention of 'See you tomorrow!' That was unusual. The sun was sizzling hot, but on its way down. Traders were heading back home. That was the norm. Most market

goers, too, were making their way home. That was the norm. Mothers carrying loads of commodities on their heads shuffled their feet homebound. That was the norm. Some people hurried home, hoping to be there on time to watch election results on their telly or listen on the radio. That was expected . . .

Seven at night! The sun was down, and darkness had overcome the suburb; it was natural. That evening, when Samuel Kivuitu, head of the Electoral Commission of Kenya, announced the incumbent candidate winner of a coveted presidency, everything changed in an instant for almost everyone. The word of President Kibaki's win spread like a wild fire, as spontaneous chaos erupted. There was anger among many. Distress engulfed the nation. People became suspicious of one another. Maraba was not immune to this suspicion. That was not the norm. Most people *knew* the opposition had triumphed over the incumbent. That was vetoed by overt corruption. That was not a surprise.

Sam, who was still in town when the news broke, was making his way home. He had neither heard the news nor knew what had happened. He only noticed the commotion. Right away, he knew all was not well. People were either hurrying or running to somewhere. Startled by the commotion, he too started running like everyone else. Young people were running away. Older people were running away. Even the disabled braved the tumult, hobbling along for their safety. Men and women empty handed were running out of fear. But what fear? Their bare feet slapped hard on the hot dry asphalt. Streams of sweat drenched their glittery faces in the hue of dust. Sam followed suit. And running they did, down the steep embankment from the town, down past the Indian cremation heading towards the Kenya Seed; its steel gates were tightly fastened to bar away would be intruders. Sam pressed on, hoping to make it safely home to his suburb before sunset. There was no turning back.

When Sam got at the end of the tarmac, the road forked, one side veering towards the right, while the other was simply a dirt road, a continuation of the same path he had used several years ago when he first came to town. In the confusion, and on this particular day, he could not think. For a split second, he could not remember where he was, for the ruckus was too much for him to bear. He just stood still

and bamboozled in the middle of the road, trying to decide which path to take, as though he had never been on that road before. He could taste, through the after smoke of burning tires, the fresh chance of a tumultuous present. A sharp turn towards to the right would lengthen his trip, forcing him to run past the Kenya Cereal Board; then, make another sharp left turn to head-on down to his suburb. If he continued to press downward, he would only have a shorter distance. This was not very confusing, but, at that juncture, it in deed was as baffling as anything he had ever experienced. He favoured the latter because of its safety. Without thinking, he sprinted to the left, torpedoing homeward with the speed of lightning. He ran until he was close to the front of Tharau's property where a bunch of hoodlums were congregating. Immediately, he knew what they about to do. Then, he did the unexpected! He tried to reason with them. What followed was blatantly fantastic—some of the hoodlums tossed kerosene bombs into the house. The house erupted into flames. Others, menacingly, started to harass Sam. Sensing danger, he started running again. Danger was too close for comfort. To his left and as he forged forward, there was a smug plume of smoke. Then tongues of fierce flames, destructive beautiful flames, shoot up high through Tharau's Hostel consuming everything in its path. This was the very house Sam had worked on during his early days in town. The giant orange flames cascaded upwards into the deep-blue sky. Sam watched with horror as the iron roof of the house begun to crumple like a house of cards, glass windows crackling like fire crackers, as tongues of flame shoot through the already busted windows. Dark smoke, as dark as a locomotive's, oozed off the already caved roof. Behind the dark smokes, hot orange tongues of flame sizzled, gobbling everything in its path. The Bermuda Blue paint on its walls darkened as the house was ravenously consumed. Agitated spectators brandishing machetes and waving twigs in the air guarded the entrance into the compound lest any daring nincompoop attempt dousing the flames.

Suddenly, Sam saw dozens of young men rapidly pumping their legs in a mad fury emerge. They were red-eyed and headed towards him brandishing sharpened machetes destined to destroy life without

pity. As they stomped towards him, only swirling dust remained behind. Their eyes were unblinking in the twilight of dusk. Darkness pressed its presence much earlier than usual, forcing people to withdraw into their homes out of fear of being accosted. Curious ones hid at a distance watching the bizarre events unfold. Other young men carried with them bottles brim filled with a colourless liquid. Every living thing in their path scuttled away in a confused manner. Sam, frightened by the emergent horde, tripped into a face plant in a trench. He was not trying to avoid the marauding youth, or to avoid falling prey to their unforgiving, blood thirsting stampede. He simply tripped!

Confusing Sam for a cowardly enemy combatant, one man, who appeared to be the head mad dog of the horde, sprinted towards him, his feet thumping much harder into the already dry earth towards Sam, leaving behind swirling dust. He was a giant of a man, mean and fierce looking. Sam could feel his clunking footsteps as he drew closer to him, while loud unsynchronized voices heckled the man: “Get him! Get him!” Nerves made Sam’s stomach tighten, but he dared not lift his head. His body broke into a cold sweat. He had lost total control of it as though it was no longer his, but one inhabited by some alien.

Before he could gather courage to pry himself off the ground, run for his life, he felt a man’s giant hand grab him by the belt, lifting him up, as though he were as light like a feather. He dangled him high and spun him around as though he were thread on a spindle to a whopping laughter. He opened his eyes to look into the giant’s eyes, but they sparkled with an insane fury. He was firing for a kill. Sam feared for his life. Was he going to perish? In that horrifying moment, his vision blurred as he did the only thing left to do. He closed his eyes. Almost all sounds around him stopped. He saw nothing. He heard nothing. He said nothing. He was so tightly lipped like a mute, but he was no mute, just a frightened man like a mouse at the sight of a cat. Thoughts of his untimely demise remained upon his mind: “I am dead! I am d.e.a.d! Death has finally dawned on me.” His heart, clogged with awfulness, weakened as he did the unthinkable: He wet himself.

Disgusted, the giant dropped him to the ground and pinned him there. Sam felt pain. Real pain. He wanted to cry, but he could not. His grandfather had warned him that boys and real men never cry, ever. He swallowed his pain like a man. The giant leaned forward, inches from his mangled body. His breath smelt awful. Frightened, Sam could not even open his eyes to steal another glimpse at him.

"Is he one of *us*?" he heard someone ask.

"I don't know!" the giant bellowed.

"That is the nincompoop who wanted to stop our job at Tharau's place!" someone yelled.

"Traitor! Traitor!"

"Get him! Get him!" the crowd heckled.

"If he is one of *us*, ask him to say ten words in Luhya!"

"Yeah!"

"Make him do that!"

"Say ten words in Luhya!" the giant barked.

Sam being frightened to his wits end lost all speech; his words stuck to his throat like polyps. Not only that, but also his brain was so frozen he could not form a rational thought, as though he had suffered from ether induced coma. He could not recollect a word, not even a simple greeting of *mulembe*.¹⁷ He was a dumb mute. In that moment of utter confusion, his mind took flight to the only time he had been ever frightened. That was when he had his second fight in his life, a fight with his teacher Judas. That scene was so vivid on his mind as though it was his present . . .

"Sam," he recalled Judas's menacing whisper the day he had gone to the Principal's office to stake his defence as to why he struck his teacher. "I just wanted to let you know that I have decided to make Nekesa a decent woman."

"What do you mean?" Sam said as though he did not understand the implication of Judas' statement.

"I want you to leave her alone. You hear!" Judas grunted.

"I want you to leave my woman alone!" he said plainly and in affirm tone.

¹⁷ Peace

“*Your* woman? *Your* woman?” Sam said unable to believe his ears.

“Yes! She has agreed to marry me, be my second wife.”

The effect of the news was as shocking as it was devastating. Then, the unthinkable happened; Sam lost his speech. Instead, a tingling sensation cropped in his arm as, he formed a nice tight round fist and unleashed lethal blow onto his teacher’s jaw. He punched him again; however, before he could do more damage to Judas’ face, another teacher walked out of the office and intervened. Judas returned into the office, nursing a wounded manhood.

To tame the fury of his heart, Sam walked around the office a couple of times, hoping Judas might be dim-witted enough to wander outside. He never did. He must have been smarter than Sam thought. It was during this time that he noticed Judas’ bike leaning against the staff room wall. Suddenly, a mischievous thought crept through his mind. Yes, he was going to steal his bike. Delighted with his decision, Sam dashed for bike, grabbed it, and rode off. “That should teach him a lesson!” he mumbled, but he was wrong. Judas walked out of the office just as Sam was riding off.

“Sam!” he yelled after him. “Bring my bike back.You! You! Son of a donkey!”

Sam did not hear him. Neither did he look behind. He rode off into the sunset. Even though it was hot and uncomfortable to ride a bike, he did not care. Warm humid air brushed violently against his skin. He cycled all the way to Lake Victoria, which was about three miles away from the school. Once there, he broke the bike into pieces and dumped them, one by one, into the lake. Then he sat down by the shore and watched the pieces drift off.

There was no change in the weather.

The air was still unbearably humid. Sam watched the ripples across the water as the pieces bounced up and down, up and down, and washed away by tides. Drenched in sweat, beads of moisture ran down his back, but Sam was not rattled by it. He simply sat, in silence, alone.

‘That should teach him a lesson,’ he mumbled, gazing into the lake as far and wide as the eye could see, or until the shore gradually sloped down into the depth of earth. Sam was startled from the deep

recess of his mind by a firm hand as it tightly squeezed the side of his right shoulder.

“Where is it?” he heard a loud angry and raspy voice say.

Before he could answer, he heard someone kick him in the back, an act which reeled him back to his present.

“*Chapa yeye*—beat him,” he heard someone shout. “If he cannot say a simple Luhya word, he is not one of us!”

Right away, Sam gave-up the will to live. His body was no longer his, but theirs for enjoyment. And enjoying it, they did. Blow after blow after blow rained on his body. As they struck him, the giant’s firm grip still held him tightly and pinned him to the ground. Blow after blow, crash landed on the poor lad’s body, but he dared not offer any resistance. It all happened too fast. It was senseless. How could he assert his identity? Did he even have an identity? Suddenly, he recollected the day he had renounced his Logooli identity. That was long ago. If only his father had not rejected him in his formative years, he would not have been in this fix. That did not matter anymore. He pushed these thoughts off his mind, wishing he had taken the other route back home. Blow after blow continued to land on his body until it became numb.

Then, out of nowhere, he heard, distantly, a male voice barking an order.

“Let him go!” the voice was loud and robust.

The men halted for a second.

“Are you trying to kill him?” the voice said.

No one answered.

Sam heaved a sigh of relief.

“Let him go!” the voice barked again.

Sam’s assailants turned a deaf ear to him. Instead, it fuelled their resolve. A series of successive blows continued to rain hard on his numbed body. What brutish assault! What a despicable brutish batch of rogues.

“Come on, let him go! Don’t you know he is one of us?” the voice urged. Sam did not open his eyes to steal a peep at the speaker.

“You foolish old man, get out of here before we also do some serious damage to you!” he heard an angry voice yell!

Disregarding the voice, the man persisted, “For goodness sake, let him go. I know him. He is one of us! You wouldn’t want to shed your kinsman’s blood, do you?”

“Ah! Leave him alone,” another voice said dismissively. “We have knocked enough sense into him,” someone mumbled.

*“Wewe kijana, jifunze lugha ya babu zako! Wasikia?”*¹⁸

*“Mwache huyu pumbavu!”*¹⁹ another voice added.

Hearing that, the giant lifted Sam’s limpid body into the air, shook him up, and dropped him to the ground like an over-inflated ball. The horde broke off their excitement as they started the unprecedented march towards the town.

Afraid, Sam did not move. He just lay there for a while, listening to the voices of his attackers as they ran off.

When he was certain they were a safe distance, Sam lifted his head fastidiously as though he wanted to take one glimpse, a tiny glimpse, at the men who had nearly killed him, but they were gone. He could only see fading images of them from a distance, and as they continued on with their rampage. They were still pumping and thumping their feet in a heightened manner looking for another unsuspecting victim. In their tracks, only swirling dust remained. Sam heaved a sigh of relief to be alive.

Now safe, Sam turned to looking all about him, see if the man who had saved his life was still around. He wanted to thank him, but he was gone. That made him very disappointed, but happy to be alive.

Sam staggered to his feet. He experienced so much pain that he had to shake it off. Out of fear of being accosted again, he started running away from the chaos, as though the hurt inflicted upon his body had vanished. He darted off with the speed of lightning, his feet pounding the almost dry earth ferociously. While distantly, he could hear voices screaming and shouting bloody murder. Walls on burning houses crumbled and windows shattered. He had never, in his life, heard of such racket. So he ran. And running he did. At last he was

¹⁸ Young man, learn your ancestral language.

¹⁹ Leave this fool alone.

slow—nursing the injury he had sustained from the beating. Then, he increased pace and ran faster and faster. Only the swiftness of his feet could save him now lest the men change their mind about him and return. Everything around him now moved fast in a rupture of swirling dust in the wake of tumultuous wind, funnelling into the already polluted air smells of burning rubber. Every man, every woman, every child for himself. Nothing more, nothing less. Only sounds of gunfire blasted the air. Around him, giant balls of grey smoke filled the air. He did not stop until he was at home and safely. And that was just the beginning of his problems.

That night when Sam reclined on his bed, he was alone and his body ached profusely. Each time he turned, his entire body ached afresh. He had no painkillers, so he ground his teeth in disgust. Not only that, his wife had not returned home, and that worried him to his wits end. He wished she, like most people from her ethnicity, had fled to the police station for safety. These thoughts kept him wide awake. Besides, he was also terrified of the dark, afraid of what might happen to him. Already, he knew some of his neighbour's homes were set ablaze that night. For this reason, she struggled with his sleep.

Not only did he struggle with sleep, but also his bedroom remained dimly lit, cold and uncomfortable. The wick of his lantern danced lazily in an already cracked glass, which reminded him of why he had woken up at the twilight of dawn just to be among the earliest people to cast his vote for Raila Amolo Odinga and his Orange Democratic Movement. He coveted change, just like most people. It seemed the right thing to do. No. It was the only thing to do, participating in a democratic exercise to elect a new leader. Change had to happen. It was this hope for change that infused his veins like a drug. Hope for a new dawn. Hope for a new beginning. Unfortunately, when it occurred, it turned out to be a change he could not believe in. That wish ended abruptly the moment Kivuitu declared Kibaki winner of the coveted post. Hence, Sam's mind was now cocked in the epic of anger and silence. His dimly lit room was engulfed in an evil darkness of his time, for he knew unsurpassed mayhem of gigantic proportion had erupted. Sam tossed and turned in his hard cold bed again and again and again, hoping for it to come to an end. But the outside was filled with occasional squeals of people being forcefully evicted from their homes. Vulgar voices of haughty and half-drunk young male echoed through the night. Sounds of gunfire rattled the air as he wrapped his arms around

himself, a defeated simpleton in an insane world. He could not sleep under such conditions.

“*Wafukuze wote. Wacha waende makwao!*”²⁰ he heard the men shout. But where was that?

Sam heard another voice say, “*Onyo! Warning! This is a warning! If you are not from this region, leave! This is our land, and you do not belong here! ... Time has come for you to leave our land and return to yours! ... Whoever disobeys will die!*”

His mind swirled with fear and the manifestation of havoc. Then, his thoughts shifted to his wife Wanja. “Was she okay? Had she made a safe escape from the clutches of his assailants?” he wondered. He could not tell because she had no way of letting him know of her whereabouts let alone her security or safety. If only he had had a cell phone, perhaps she could have tried to reach him, but he had none. He had lost his when he was accosted. He tried to picture where she might be, perhaps at the police station, afraid, alone, and hungry. “What if she was hurt?” he wondered. He could not dwell too much on such negativity. He quickly pushed these thoughts from his mind. No, he promised to find on her the next day.

Sam’s thoughts became distracted once more when he heard someone yell from outside.

“*Hawa watu ni wabaya sana. Wao hawawezi kuwakubali watu kutoka sehemu zingine kukunua mashamba kwao . . . Wacha waende. Wezi hawa!*”²¹ the voices emerged again, while souls of many innocent families cried in Hades for justice.

In his solitude, Sam wondered how his wife could have had anything to do with the politicians who were the root cause of the mayhem that now threatened to erode the very fabric of a nation that was the beacon of the eastern region. Now the nation’s history was being re-written in blood. His young family was threatened by forces beyond his control. That night, Sam hardly slept, or rather, when

²⁰ Chase them all . . . Let them return where they came from.

²¹ These people are bad. They cannot allow people from other ethnicities to buy land where they came from. Let them go back . . . thieves.

sleep overcame him, he hardly noticed, for it was to the sound of gun fire that his eyes, heavy with sleep, closed.

Meanwhile, earlier that evening, when Wanja arrived at the police station, which they later nicknamed Kuresoi,²² she was wheezing and panting. Her eyes were gaping wide and her chest heaving. Streams of sweat ran down her brow, her back, even the palms of her hands. She ran all the way from the market to the station. She had not felt the burden of distance for when the threat of danger became imminent. She had found strength and energy she did not know she had. She took to her heels like an antelope. She did not stop to think. She did not stop to look back to see who was chasing after her, she simply ran. She was shabbily dressed in a long faded maroon cotton dress with a black-and-white polka-dotted headscarf. Both her dress and headscarf were wet from sweat—thin lines of perspiration glinted on her brow, though she appeared pale-faced with deep shadows beneath her eyes. On her feet, she was wearing scuffed brown rubber shoes, with both her little toes sticking out on the sides. When she left her house, she had planned to buy her goods and then return home right away, take a quick bath, eat some food, and then go to her stall. She had not anticipated the marketplace pandemonium that had left her dumbfounded, forcing her to run to the police station for safety.

Upon arrival, she noticed that the station was swarming with people—both young and old, sick, poor, affluent, people from all walks of life. Those who were able bodied lugged with them a hodge-podge of unusual cargo—bundles of clothing wrapped in old *kanga*. Some had them stuffed in sisal sacks. Others had woven baskets brim filled with a lot of odds and end. One man had even dragged his goat with him and tied it to a measly tree by the station. The ill-fated creature was nibbling grass near the bark of a tree, but there was hardly anything on it—the goat will be food for someone someday.

²² Kuresoi was an area in Molo which was tremendously affected by the clashes of 2007-2008. The displaced Kakamega residents identified their plights to those of people in Kuresoi.

Those with means drove themselves to the station; some peddled their way there, while others rode their motorbikes. Surely, the clashes did not discriminate the poor from the rich. Older men, unable to protect their families, hung their heads in shame. Women mourned the calamity which had befallen them. The children, who were too young to understand the tragedy that had transpired, were running up and down the station as though, for once, they had the luxury of a playground.

Wanja did not exchange any formal greetings with anyone. Under normal circumstances, she would have, and at the very least, some form of salutation—be it ‘good morning,’ ‘*vipi*,’ or ‘*atherere, wae mwegha*’—to almost everyone—but now, such trivialities were merely a nuisance. How could she say ‘good morning’ when it was not a good morning? Or a ‘good afternoon?’ Or ‘good evening?’ Perhaps, ‘a good hellish morning, afternoon, or evening’ would have sufficed.

After catching her breath, she looked around until she spotted a patch of an unoccupied space to sit. There were no chairs. There were no benches, just a vacant space on the grounds of the station. She walked there slowly by slowly, dragging her feet; for she was done with running. She did not know any one of the people at the station. She did not recognize any familiar faces. Then, just in a twinkling, she wondered if her parents were alright. These thoughts caused her stomach muscles to tighten and a lump to crop in her throat. Tears began to sting the rims of her eyelids, but she struggled hard to tame them. She dropped her eyes to the ground lest someone saw her tearing-up. She pushed these thoughts about her parents off her mind temporarily, for she knew she had plenty of time to worry about them.

It was during this time that her eyes fell upon a woman who was almost the same age as her mother. ‘She too must have run to the station,’ she thought. Perhaps, her mother and father were on their way. The woman was wearing a pale washed floral dress. Her headscarf was untidily wrapped around her head, with one tip of the scarf sticking out above her left ear. Strands of graying hair peeked out beneath the headscarf near her right ear and had the appearance of perfectly locked dreadlocks. Though, they were not dreadlocks,

but old looking braids, perhaps three weeks old. The aura about her was symptomatic of dejection—utter helplessness.

The woman sat quietly on a bundle of clothes wrapped in what appeared as an old *kanga*. She was clenching her head between the palms of her hands. Her eyes were red hot and swollen, no longer moist. Perhaps, she had a dead husband. A burnt house. No home. Nothing. Nowhere to go, like most people at the station. Wanja thought. Change simply happened to her too swiftly for her to understand its magnitude. So, she sat sullenly in her dissolution and aloneness. By her side, stood a toddler—a boy dressed in a faded blue jumpsuit and a long-sleeved t-shirt. Because he was not wearing any shoes, his feet were caked with red soil. Under his toenails, a thin layer of red loam remained. He was a plumb one with chubby cheeks. His eyes shone brightly that the sparkles of the sun's rays were reflected in them. He had the appearance of a snobbish pestilence, a mere annoyance to a mother in distress. He was persistently pulling and tugging her right hand that clenched her head, but it was unyielding as though glued to her chin. In her solitude, the light seemed to penetrate her brown eyes. It was clear her eyes were now inward on her memory. It was as though the gods had colluded against her. She was not alone. There were many other women in her predicament. Similarly, there were many men in her quandary. The boy would have to wait. Poor little fellow, he was probably hungry. But there was no food at the police station that his mother could have given him, just broken families. The boy continued nagging his mother, but she neither acknowledged him nor moved. She was like a rigid fossil. Defeated, the boy walked away from her looking for something interesting to amuse himself. Wanja watched the boy until he found other boys his age with whom he began to play. His mother did not move a muscle—even her eyes did not follow the boy's movement. Even if calamity had befallen him, she would have received the news with indifference, an attitude that defied logic, given the current state of affairs, where people were clinging to their living relatives like a tick on a cow's udder. That was what most 'normal' human beings would have done, but she was not most humans; she was the daughter of Eve unduly punished for the sins of

others—politicians to be precise—who bore no immediate ties to her.

Later that day, Wanja learned from the woman that it had been long since she had visited her home. “I eloped with my husband many years,” she told Wanja. “I never returned home!”

“Why was that?” Wanja probed.

“My people resented my husband!”

“And why was that?” Wanja queried innocently.

“He was a Luo man from Alego!” Wanja was about to ask her why she ended-up in Kakamega, but before she could, the woman added: “You know what our people say about Luos?”

Wanja nodded her reply, but uttered no word, realizing just how similar their stories were; that they had both married outside their ethnicity save for one difference: Sam was a “Logooli” man. Logooli people circumcise their male folks, and that is why Sam was accepted by her people. As for the woman, Luos do not perform this rite of passage, and that is why her people rejected her husband. What a travesty!

“I should have listened to them!” the woman added.

“Why do you say that?”

“He chased me out of our home when the fracas broke. He did not protect me!” the woman fell silent for a moment. “That is why am here.”

“I never returned home. Even when my mother died, I missed her funeral. No one knew how to reach me.”

“Oh!” Wanja exclaimed.

“By the time I received the news of her passing, the funeral had far long been concluded.”

Wanja gathered from the woman that she did not have transport to go back home just to touch the moist red soil on her mother’s grave, before it was overgrown with weeds. She resigned to remain in town, consoling herself that: ‘I couldn’t bring her back to life, even if I went!’ So, she continued to live in her ramshackle mud shanty separated from her family. But in the wake of the fracas, her shanty had been reduced to a heap of ruins, and her husband had abandoned her. Now, she had nothing, completely nothing.

By the day's end, Wanja could still see the woman sitting in the same position she had left her after their brief conversation. She appeared mortified by her present. Her skin had darkened under the fierce sun, and her elongated shadow stretched to the east. Wanja wondered if the woman could loosely hear people's conversations of devastation float her way, bearing dead dreams, like her dead dreams. A dead world. There were no chants of joy, just sorrow. She wondered if the woman heard another woman's voice as it broke into a Swahili song. The woman did not budge. Perhaps, the words to the song were meaningless to her:

Si njia rabisi

Mashaka ni mengi

Mapigo nayo majaribu

Vikwazo vimo tele

Lakini najua

Mwokozi yu pamoja nami

It is not an easy road

Filled with many trials

Challenges and temptations

There are many hurdles

But I know

The Lord is with me

Wanja sat there, watching this interesting sad saga of the woman in mute silence for a very long, long time.

Where was the Lord when she was forced to leave the comfort of her home? How come He did not come to her rescue? She sat quietly, her dry lips hardly moving. Occasionally, her lips practiced speech, but did not speak. A fly zoomed past her eyes, but there was little recognition in her watching. Her eyes did not blink. Even when the red sun set hours later and left a shining twilight above the sky, she did not seem to notice it. Her son, who had been playing away from her for a very long time, returned and held her hand gently without pulling it. She did not stir. The boy simply clasped her emotionless hand between his little fingers, sat by her side, and leaned in on her; it was as though he wanted to press his body deep into hers and disappear completely. She did not stir. He thrust his thumb into his mouth and started sucking on it; his eyes, without his consent, closed as the deep hands of slumber embraced him.

Within no time, even Wanja became afflicted with the same malady that seemed to have stricken the poor woman. She moved

farther and farther away from her present as the sun dipped into the western hemisphere. Memories of how she had ended—up at the police station unfolded. Yes, she had gone to the market to buy goods for sale in her stall. This was a journey she took regularly and on every market day. There, she purchased onions, tomatoes, vegetables, fruits, fish, and many other odds and ends that her customers, mostly women from Maraba suburb, regularly needed and bought.

She remembered how she had left her house at dawn to be among the first arrivals at the market, early enough to purchase her fresh produce—the early riser catches the best of everything. The journey, a steep incline into town, was best done in the morning before the sun became too hot. She did not take a *matatu*. She walked all the way to town, hoping to ride the van on her return journey, especially since she would be carrying a lot of goods.

She walked slowly along the road. As usual, there were many other traders on the same mission. Men and women hauling goods to the market in wheelbarrows were a common sight. Jam-packed *matatus* zoomed-by with lots of loads tied on the carriers. She saw turn-boys hanging by the doorway. *Boda boda* boys carrying ‘lazy’ passengers peddled on—sweating, huffing and puffing, but Wanja continued her steady journey. She wondered if these people were not afraid of falling from the stupid motor bikes, and many did fall. She did not witness such an incident. Privately, she knew she would laugh were she to witness such a spectacle, even if it was not funny.

No sooner had she arrived at the market than she experienced an eerie feeling about her. The air was still cool and calm, but it had the semblance of tumult, not soothing. The sun was now up and gently gliding above the eastern horizon. It was definitely going to be a hot steamy day. Most traders had not completely spread their commodities for sell. Already, she could feel people’s uncharacteristic indifference towards her. No one greeted her. But she greeted people nonetheless. Usually, traders were prone to being friendlier to their customers than vice versa. Some responded to her with disinterest; while others hardly said a word. *‘I must be imagining things!’* that was all she could think. Most female traders with whom she had done

business many times appeared reluctant to sell fresh produce to her. She could not understand, believe it. These were the same people whom, only days ago, had pestered her to buy from them. These were the same people who had offered her a reduced price when she seemed reluctant to buy from them. How times had changed. Instead of opening their sacks of produce, they simply gawked at her, as though she was the devil. They spoke to one another in hushed whispers, as though she was not there. Others mumbled unintelligible words in their local dialect. It was clear the content of the conversation was not meant for her hearing. The aura of the market changed drastically. She could feel it. Then, without warning, there was movement everywhere. Traders started to bundle-up their things, covering them with giant-size tent-like covers. People's eyes of suspicion roamed around randomly and everywhere.

"She is one of them!" Wanja heard one woman say.

"Who?" came a response.

"Her," the woman said pointing an accusatory finger in Wanja's direction.

"How do you know? Doesn't she look just like you?"

"No! Am serious, look at her again!"

"No!"

"Look at her again!"

"I don't see it! She can be Akinyi or Adisa"

"Look at her round face."

Wanja turned around to see whom the women were talking about, but there was no one else there, but her. Many beady eyes turned on her, black cold eyes, countless eyes. They all stared at her. She became uneasy. In her uneasiness, she did what she always did when nervous. She smiled, exposing the beautiful gap in her teeth.

"What did I tell you?"

"What?"

"She is not one of us . . . didn't you see her teeth?"

"What about them?"

"They are tainted brown! People from here don't have tainted teeth."

"Nonsense!"

“You know what they say?”

“What?”

“Kikuyus eat a lot of *gwashe*—Irish potatoes!”

“So?”

“That is why their teeth are tainted brown!”

Insulted by the conversation, Wanja sighed in frustration. Immediately, she started walking away, hoping to find another trader, but she was not very optimistic. Gut feeling told her to abort her desire to purchase her produce, but, on second thought, she knew she had to. Her very livelihood depended on it. Little did she know what was to come!

Wanja walked to another trader, but she met the same fate.

“What does she want here?” another woman said to her neighbor, throwing scornful glances at her.

‘All is not well!’ Wanja thought.

Immediately, again, countless eyes—brown eyes, red eyes—all, at once, gawked at her. Other angry eyes inspected her, as though she were meat at a butchery undergoing the inspector’s scrutiny. One woman spat noisily on the ground, with her eyes firmly fixed on her.

‘But what have I done?’ she wondered again.

She returned home having purchased very little to furnish her stall.

Later that day, when she opened her stall at her home market, she had very few customers. That was odd. Twice she contemplated shutting her shop, but she could not. She needed the money to sustain her family. None of her fellow traders were friendly towards her. They refused to interact with her. Her regular customers refused to buy from her. Suddenly, she remembered the earlier treatment she had received at the market, but she brushed it off as a mere coincidence. That was six in the evening. Once again, she contemplated removing herself from the situation, but she could not. Mustering courage, she stayed on, aware that her produce might be bad. *‘I need to do this! I need to sell my goods’* she mumbled. Was it worth the trouble? Nerves made her stomach tighten like banded steel. Immediately, her body broke into a cold sweat.

Then, a thought flashed her mind, *Perhaps, I should talk to them?* But she abandoned this thought. *It is not wise . . . Yes! It is not wise!* she concluded. Even though it was only prudent she should talk to them, ask them to unveil the mystery behind their apparent animosity towards her, common sense told her otherwise. She knew she had done no wrong. She followed her conscience. Once again, she tried to garner courage to talk the women; however, before she could do so, before her lips had formed meaningful syllables, chaos broke!

She heard a voice, a loud threatening male voice, say from behind: “*Wafukuzeni hawa watu kutoka hapa!*” She turned her head toward the direction of the voice for two reasons: To see who was speaking and whom they were chasing, but it was nearly impossible to identify him. The market place was crowded with people. She could not tell where most had emerged. Immediately, there was panic, chaos and confusion all around and about her. Then, the muscles on her face tightened and her heart began to race wildly. All was not well. She knew and understood that fact. People everywhere—young men, men, women, and children—were running everywhere in a confused fury and in different directions.

Before Wanja understood what was going on, she heard another voice. It was a loud yelp: “*Wakamate note!*” There was no way she could allow herself to be caught.

She turned again in the direction of the voice, only to see an unruly band of young men running towards her. All eyes fell on her again. Some female traders charged towards her. Her heart skipped a beat. Once again, suspicion of her ethnic identity and the whispers of moments ago began to make sense.

“*Wachape hawa watu!*”²³ she heard the voice say again. The voice was firm and harsh, but it was not a familiar voice. Then, she heard sounds of whip lashing and loud screams of people.

She did not remember how her bag slipped out of her hands. She did not feel any pain when it crashed on her toe. Immediately, she forgot why she had gone to her stall in first place. Without thinking, she took to her heels in a sprint. Even if she was no runner, her feet

²³ Beat these people

moved with ire and without her consent. She did not know to where she was running, yet she knew she had to go. So she ran. Although she wanted to scuttle down to her flat, she aborted that thought quickly. Her flat might not be safe. She was right. When she reached at the Shell gas station opposite the Catholic Cathedral, she realized that there was another band of marauding young men brandishing sharpened machetes and waving clubs in their hands. Others had in hand bottles filled with a clear liquid . . . The road was blocked. Quick thinking, she decided to run towards the post office, which seemed to be the general direction most people who were being pursued were headed. With her mind made-up to go in that direction, she did not look back to see her assailants. She just ran as though her feet had been infused with cheetah speed. She was convinced that if she found a safe haven unscathed, she would have plenty of time to think and understand what was going on, or uncover the justice behind her unjust branding as an enemy of the people. She ran past the post office all the way to the police station. She was not alone. Men, women, children and alike ran in the same direction. *Matatu* drivers sped fast along the Kakamega-Kisumu road. *Boda Boda* boys peddled as fast as they could cycle—they were in no presence of mind to pick up passengers. They all raced towards the police station following a botched election. The police, once alerted to the fracas, stood on guard with their weaponry, for the lives of many hung in the balance.

Wanja's stomach growled. It was not a growl of gas, but hunger. Poor woman, she was so engrossed with the fear for her life that she forgot she had not eaten. Even still, chances of having a meal were as remote now as her return to her home. That evening, she slept on an empty stomach. Even if she had had food, there was no stove upon which to cook. She had no pots and pans. She had no plates. She had no utensils. There was no water to drink. She had no bed. She had no beddings. She only had the clothes on her back!

The sun set, leaving behind starry strokes of red, which ushered in the gloom of death and drum bits of terror in a looming darkness. Men's minds were cloistered in fear. The women, huddled together like caged birds, watched their hapless emasculated men as they

struggled to make sense of their world, which had the marking of genocide—though they dared not utter that word. They were fraught with fright to their wits end. What frightened them the most were the voices that floated their way along the Kisumu road—of vicious thugs vowing to teach them a lesson—'*leo wataona!*'" These menacing words were made for their hearing, and they did hear them; screams, giggles, and cruel laughter that followed the threats.

The next morning, Wanja opened her eyes and gathered herself up from a dew covered ground as soon as the first streak of light appeared on the horizon. Already, Nature had withheld its wrath against them that night, for it did not rain. God had Her own way of protecting the innocent. But the blood of the innocent— young and old—continued to baptize the earth everywhere in the nation. Drip by drip, drop by drop, the warm gentle red quenched the earth's thirst as, one by one, the innocent fell without mercy or just cause.

Wanja scanned the station to see if anything had changed, and indeed, it had. There were swirls and eddies of people at the police station. More had arrived in the middle of the night while she slept, even if only for a very brief moment. She could not remember hearing anything, for her body and mind had simply succumbed to fatigue. And her eyes . . . Yes, her eyes simply closed without her consent. Now, as she could see, the station was cluttered with a sea of people. Some were slouched all over the place, their bodies exposed to the elements of the morning—the early morning sun and dew covered fields. Some were still sleeping in the same clothes they had on since their arrival at the station and had no hope of changing them any time soon. Others were huddled in clusters. Those who were awake, had long, sad, tired faces, and spoke to one another in hushed whispers. The policemen and policewomen roamed around, clutching onto their weapons, afraid to be taken unaware. Their presence could hardly be missed. Some mothers, whose heads kept on bobbing—up and down, up and down like geckos—clung to their youngsters.

Wanja could see clutter everywhere— hodge-podge of unusual cargo—bundles of clothing wrapped in old *kanga*, stuffed sisal sacks, woven baskets brim filled with a lot of odds and end, bags of things, uncountable things. That may have appeared to some as useless, but concealed a heaping of lifetime memories of the displaced, priceless

memories. It was precisely at that time when Wanja's mind took flight to her family, her immediate family. She worried about them. This is not to suggest that she did not think about them earlier, she had; only, there was too much misery around her that she had focused more on her 'now!' It was only in her waking that she began to think about her family. She wondered if they had had the presence of mind to keep intact family memories worth remembering and forgetting those worth forgetting. Were they still alive or dead? Were they hurt or unscathed? The only person she did not worry much about was Sam, her husband, who was from Western Province. She knew he was protected by his ethnicity. She was wrong.

As she continued to scan the station, she wondered why she had not seen anyone from her Maraba community. *'Perhaps,'* she thought privately, *'they are all dead. That couldn't be, could they? No, they have to be okay! Yes . . . They are okay. They have to be okay and that's all there is to it,'* she mumbled. Then, her eyes fell upon one familiar face among the crowd . . . A grain of sand among a sea of people. Suddenly, her heart raced with a hidden. *'They are not okay!'* she muttered to herself, more so than to anyone else. She closed her eyes in a silent prayer, trying to tame the fears within her heart. When she reopened them and looked in the man's direction, the sun shone brightly into her eyes that she could barely see. She squinted. Yes, the man was still there. He had not moved an inch. His body was as rigid as stone, as though he had been transformed into a pillar of salt. He did not notice her. She rubbed her eyes, removing sleep matter from their corners. The man was sitting on the ground with his knees folded at forty-five degree angle. He was holding his head between the palms of his hands. And his eyes, his eyes were to the ground, but she still noticed his frail looking and wiry frame. His head was small, but she could still see his sunken cheekbones. Even if common sense entreated her to jump-up, dash to the man, she could not; she sat quietly and motionless. That first familiar form was of none other than Koza, her neighbor and her husband's friend. What a relief it was to see him. Perhaps, he held the mystery of her family's plight.

After a while, she gathered herself up, and walked towards the man. She had no time to waste with formal pleasantries. She had no

time to say 'good morning.' How could she if her morning seethed with sorrow? She wanted to know if her family was alright.

"Koza!" she said, startling the man from the deep recess of his subconscious mind. "Is that really you?"

The man raised his head briskly in the direction of her voice. There was a look of surprise on his visage. Of all the people, he did not anticipate seeing a familiar face. Wanja looked on, giving him a time to regain composure.

"Koza, is that you?" she said again. It only took the man a couple seconds to return to his conscious self.

"Oh for goodness sake, Wanja, of course, it is me!" he said. Then he added, "Gosh, am I glad to see you!"

"My sentiments exactly! When did you get here?"

"Late last night!"

"Is everyone alright in your family?"

"I don't know! I have not heard from them. I wasn't home when it happened."

"Me neither!"

"Where were you?"

"I had gone to complete a job at Amalemba. Kamau and I had been working on this for weeks. That was before the election took place."

"Is Kamau and his family okay?"

"I don't know, but someone saw him running towards Bukhungu Stadium."

"Was that before the fracas?"

"It had to be! And how about your family?"

"I don't know . . . I was hoping you had seen or heard anything."

"I am afraid not! Like you, I was not home. I keep on praying that they are *all* okay," she added, even if, deep down, she knew this was purely an illusion.

"Amen to that!"

The two would have continued talking, but their conversation was cut short when they heard a loud sound of gunfire.

After that Wanja sat in silence watching the swirling eddies of people around her. Her face was hardened by their sorrow.

Occasionally, her mind took flight to her older brother Nicholas Gicheru, whom they nicknamed Nico. He was four years older than she and was a very thin framed man. Given the nature of his profession as a *matatu* owner and driver, he had to, often times, muscle his way amid a riotous lot of people—turn-boys and passengers. Some of them bordered on the verge of being absolute brutes—snobbish brutes. Eventually, he developed a quick temper, which seeped into his everyday life. For when he returned home, he was abrupt with his family and treated them, as though they were the very brutes he encountered daily on the road—and this was a bad thing. In his mind, these two worlds collided; though, he worked hard to correct himself. Despite this minor short-coming, he had a sociable personality, which propelled him to success.

Late in his adult life, Nico, a rapt man with bushy eyebrows and beard, had the look of success written all over his face, but most people did not know how he had earned his success. Most would have liked to believe he amassed it because he was born from a privileged ethnicity. Though he was not as rich as Ambwere, the Logooli tycoon, he was simply a quick thinker, a fast talker, strategist and an astute businessman. The way he dressed, when he was not driving his *matatu*, spoke volumes. He wore expensive suits he purchased from exclusive boutiques. Other times, when he was driving one of his *matatu*, he was not neat or clean shaven in any way. He would slip-on his faded blue jeans and a T-shirt. And with a cap on his head, with the front to the back, he would slip into his driver's seat waiting for his regular customers to board the van. He transported them to and from Kakamega to Kisumu—on the usual bumpy road—back and forth, back and forth, from sun-up to sun-down. It was a dangerous back-breaking job, but that did not matter to him. His eyes were forever on the result. He did it for several years until he had earned enough money to hire his drivers; even still, occasionally, he would hop on one of the *matatus* to see what was going on. He was so successful that Wanja always told Sam that her biggest dream was for them to own their own *matatu*. She knew if she asked her brother for help, he would, undoubtedly, assist them.

As Wanja sat stolidly, mulling over her brother's fate, she wondered if he had left home when the row began. The nature of his job was the source of her grief—as a *matatu* driver, his life was always in the jaws of the hyenas—and it was even more so now than before. She was, indeed, justified in worrying about him. Horrific stories, of *matatu* drivers meeting their Maker under the most terrifying of circumstances, floated the station. Among those stories, were rumors that many drivers were being yanked out of their vans and slaughtered like cows in cold blood. Under the blazing heat of the late December sun, steaming like the unquenchable rage of sons of men, she knew her brother's well-being, like other drivers, might have been compromised. No thought whatsoever was given to their humanity. Others were doused in Kerosene and set ablaze. Although she had witnessed such a scene and came close to being victimized, her memory had simply receded upon itself that she vaguely remembered the smoke she had seen as she made her way to the station for safety. Or the repugnant smell of burning tires mixed with sizzling and burning flesh. She did not connect all this misery to her own life. What had dominated her mind was how she would reach safety. So, she turned a blind eye to it all! But when she thought of her brother's safety, the suppressed images—of burning tires, the smoke, and the smells—all re-emerged.

Time moved at a steady pace. The sun glided with easy above the blue skies, but the danger remained like a forceful enigma. Men and women sat in contemplation. Some talked with subdued voices. Some sat in silence. Oblivious children played with one another. Others sat by their mothers' sides in silence. Others pulled at them wanting something to eat, but there was no food. More men and women trickled the station by the minute. One by one. Two by two, but they never left. There was nowhere to go. Wanja, too, sat in silence watching. There was no news about her family. And no news was good news. So, she sat silently in waited. None of the new arrivals had any information about her family. There was no information about Nico!

The mass of people at the station continued to balloon by the minute. By noon, she had not heard anything about her family, but her eyes remained watchful. Constantly, they swept over the lawn for new arrivals with eager anticipation with hopes of seeing familiar faces. Nothing happened for a long time. Soon, only one woman from Maraba arrived. She was not one of the old dwellers of the suburb, for Wanja could hardly recognize her. The woman was loud and unstoppable.

"I tell you!" the woman was saying. "What I saw down there will remain with me forever . . . really! She was speaking at the peak of her crackling voice. It was as though she was afraid no one would hear her, and her people's plight, forever lost. She could not let that happen.

Wanja, who had been sitting in wait for news from her home, stood-up hastily and ran towards where the woman was speaking. Already, she had drawn a multitude to herself. She was standing amid a crowd and talking animatedly. She was not shabbily dressed like most people at the station. She had on a long pleated blue floral dress—white daises with the yellow at its center magnified tenfold. The neckline of her dress had a round fold that had the appearance of a giant plate. Her face was sweaty, and her hands danced uncontrollably in the air as she spoke.

"What can you tell us that we don't know already?" a voice of a man shot-up from behind the crowd.

The woman, who had vowed not to be silenced, ignored the man.

"I am telling you . . . there is fire out there!" she said, pointing a finger in the direction of Maraba suburb.

"Don't we know that already?" another voice piped.

There was silence. The woman swallowed tons of saliva. There were beads of sweat from her brow that glittered in the sun. She mopped them off with the palm of her right hand. She dried her hand over her bottom. From her facial features, it was clear she was not a young woman. Perhaps, sixty years of age, but there was fire still in her eyes—bold unwavering fire in her round domineering eyes. Wanja kept her eyes on the woman's face, as though she was afraid the woman might vanish, even though she knew the possibility

of that happening was nil. Her unabated eyes remained fixated on her.

"I was there when it all started," the woman said. "Right there!"

"And where was that?" a voice queried.

"Near Tharau's hostel . . . I tell you! It was deadly. Really deadly!"

"And where were you when all this was happening?" another voice asked.

"Where do you think," the woman said irritated. "I was hiding nearby, of course. Do you think I was crazy enough to show my face out there?"

"You were lucky nobody recognized you," a woman from the crowd said.

"I couldn't even if I wanted. There was this young man who was receiving a thrashing of a lifetime."

"What had he done?" a voice queried.

"What had *he* done? And what have *we* done?" the woman retorted, angered by the question.

"I would like to know the answer to that too," chimed a male voice.

"Was he one of *us*?" somebody else queried.

"What difference does it make? No, he tried to be a hero! He attempted to reason with the men who torched Tharau's hostel."

There was a momentous silence that followed the woman's remark. A few people gasped in disbelief. Those who had ignored the woman earlier on now listened to her with rapt attention. Wide-eyed, they gawked at her with a renewed curious intensity. Most *knew* and had heard scanty stories of what had happened in Maraba. They had not seen an eyewitness. The woman filled that gap. When she began to speak again, they were now ready to gobble-up any piece of information she could share.

"The man had said destroying people's property was unjust. That some of the victims had nothing to do with the results of the election. And that was poison; his expressed sentiments, was enough to infuriate those whose rage could not be tamed."

"What happened to the man?" a woman who had spoken earlier queried.

“He tried to run for his life, but his two legs could not outrun a multitude.”

“Poor man!” someone mumbled.

“They caught him, grabbed him and beat him senselessly! Had it not been for a certain old man, Mzee Okoth, the young man would have been no more. That was all there was to it!”

Wanja knew Mzee Okoth. He did not live very far from her home. When she heard his name mentioned, her lips gaped in a sad smile as she reflected on his act of bravery, for he, too, could have been beaten. Perhaps, it was his age the young men had respected. “*What a good man!*” Wanja thought to herself. He was not just a good old man, but a man with a conscience—he tethered himself to righteousness all the time, and he never failed.

“The old man was lucky to have escaped unscathed!” the woman said.

“What did the old man do?” someone queried?

“He begged the ruffians to spare the young man’s life!”

“Did they?”

“Yes, they did!”

“So what happened to the man?”

“No sooner had they released him, than he took to his heels! I would have done the same thing, too, had I been him.”

“Poor fellow! And what was his name? Did they say?”

“I heard someone call him Sam, but I could be wrong. I left immediately after they let him go. Now I couldn’t stay there, could I?”

When the woman concluded her story, the crowd, which had gathered around her, dispersed. A few people remained, but were muted by their tragedy.

Then, the woman walked away from them, looking for a place to rest, like all the other displaced people at the station. She found *her* empty space on the lawn where she sat. And for a while, she withdrew into herself.

Meanwhile, Wanja’s thoughts of her family were rekindled by the woman’s story. She thought of Nico. She thought of her parents and her other siblings. And although the woman had mentioned a Sam,

who had been savagely beaten, she did not see any correlation between him and *her* Sam. Nonetheless, her stomach churned at the mere mention of the name. What a coincidence! She knew and was certain that *her* Sam was protected because of his ethnicity.

By the end of the second day, more and more people arrived at the station. There was some news of those who had been left behind. Some were safe. Some had vanished into Kakamega forest. Some had found good Samaritans to shelter them. Some had transformed outer-houses into places of refuge despite the repugnant stench. Wanja's family had not arrived, but she had heard rumors that they were alright. There was no word whatsoever about Nico's whereabouts. And so, she remained in wait, praying for his safe return.

She heard news of other people from there: "Mrs. Wanjogu and a sea of her other wealthy business people narrowly escaped the scathing rage of the riotous lot. She was saved from it all by a neighbor who had yanked her from her bedroom window and hid her in her home. Her house was gone, just as much as the houses of those whom the youngsters believed had robbed them of an election and hopes for a bright tomorrow—the Wanjogus, the Kamaus, the Wainaina, the Kamau, the Harry Harry, and so many others whose names shall remain unknown. The maroon steel doors, which had fortified Mrs. Wanjogu's compound from would be intruders, crumpled in a blink of an eye, its bars yanked off the walls that held it in place as though they were as light like a feather. The men looted those gates and anything worthy of taking from her home. Her minivans and cars were turned on their tops and smothered in kerosene and set ablaze. The blustering of metal and the dark smoke that spiraled upward in its aftermath marked the tumult of the day. No concrete was strong enough against the adrenalin of brute men—wall after wall of her once immaculate mansion crumbled to rubble. Chairs, utensils, beddings, and other 'minor' things were cordoned by the covetous men."

"Hii ni mali yetu!" some guy had piped.

But was such wealth really theirs for the taking?

A block from Wanjogu's home, Kamau's meager house had also crumbled like dominoes—only several kerosene bottle bombs did the job—and a few men who downed his walls. He had no steel bars to fortify his home with the illusion of safety. Nothing there could have been saved, not even his chickens. What was left behind was wanton trash.

Meanwhile, when Sam woke-up the next day, he could still feel the raw pain from the beating he endured the previous evening. He was tired and sore that he could hardly roll out of bed. Though he could see the bright shafts of light creep into his room from the gaps in his bedroom window, he just lay there, face-up thinking about his wife. He wondered if she was safe. *Perhaps she made it safe to the police station.* That was where most Kikuyus from his community had sought refuge. He knew she had to be there. There was no other place save for Kakamega forest, but it was too far from the town. Only those who had the means braved the trip.

It was during this time that Sam realized how much he loved his wife. He remembered those early days! He recalled how the two met at his sister's home. He remembered how he had searched her for a long time, but to no avail. He remembered how he fell in love with her. He remembered how she made him smile. Yes, her smiles always twirled his spirit and made his heart miss a beat. Those were moments of utter bliss. Nothing else mattered. There was nothing anyone could have done or said to keep them apart, for they were destined to be together. Those were the best years of their lives. Life was simple and uncomplicated; yet now, everything was unclear.

Sam even recollected a silly conversation he had with Wanja in the early days of their relationship.

"My parents are originally from Molo. They moved here long before I was born," Wanja had told him as way of introduction.

"You must speak Tiriki then!"

"No! I never learned!"

"And why was that?"

"I had no one to teach me."

"How about in school?"

"I went to boarding school."

"Oh, I see."

“We spoke only Swahili or English.”

“It was a crime to speak any local dialect.”

“I know that. Do you mean to say you never had any local friends?”

“My parents wouldn’t let me play with local girls. They were very protective of me. No, they were protective of all of us.”

“I guess there is no hope for us then?”

“I didn’t say that,” Wanja reassuringly.

“So what are you saying?”

“That was a long time ago.”

“There is hope for us?”

“Only if you want it to be there!”

This bit of news was important. This way, he lovers forged their friendship. After that, they never spoke of their ethnicity as a hindrance to their relationship. Had she been from Venus and him from Mars, he would still have married her, for love trumped ethnicity.

That was then. Today, Sam still lay on his bed alone. As these thoughts floated his mind, Sam realized how temporal life can be. It can change in a moment’s notice. His eyes glossed over the ceiling; he struggled to make sense of it all, mumbling to himself: “To hell with tribalism!” He bit his lower lip, and rolled his body facing the wall. “To hell with tribalism! Wanja is my wife and anchorage of my life. I don’t care that she is Kikuyu. When I get out of bed, I will go look for her,” he muttered, pulling the covers over his head. He closed his eyes to the aches of his body.

Sam did not wake-up until mid-morning. He was fatigued, and his body still ached. Even if he had woken-up early, he could not go anywhere, for Maraba was swarming with General Service Unit (GSU) men—a paramilitary wing of the Kenyan Military and Police—bent on keeping security in the area. They made their presence felt. They paraded the neighbourhood in their camouflage uniform, brandishing their guns aimlessly, and intimidating citizens. Sam was forced to suspend the vow he had made earlier on: to search for his wife. Travelling anywhere was dangerous. He could not risk

his life, even if that was selfish. Courage in the face of danger defied logic. He knew she would understand . . . Going out of the home, with the GSU men around, was like playing Russian roulette. So he stayed indoors all morning, all afternoon, until the sun went down . . .

That night, it was not only hot and humid, but also tumultuous. Sam reclined quietly on his bed in his dimly lit room. Afraid of the dark, he slept with his kerosene lamp on. His windows were tightly shut. No cool breeze came in! No humid air left the room, making it hot and sodden. Intermittent beads of sweat glided down his back, making it nearly impossible for him to sleep comfortably. He was not alone. Mothers who had been unable to fetch water from the stream earlier in the day could not bathe their children. From his bedroom, he could hear some of them yelling at their children as they cried. Perhaps the children were hungry. Or perhaps the heat was overwhelming for them. No water to dab or cool their sweltering bodies. Sam imagined the young ones pestering their mothers for one reason or another, but the mothers were paralyzed in meeting their needs.

When Sam's mind took flight to older folks, as old as his Old Man, he wondered what they might be thinking. They, too, like the children were not immune to the stress of the day or the heat. The heat did not discriminate, not like people. As for him, the heat, coupled with the absence of his wife, tormented him. He tossed and turned, tossed and turned as though his bed was infested with bed-bugs. No sleep came! He closed his eyes, but nothing happened. *"Perhaps it is the light,"* he thought. Reluctantly, he reached out for the knob of his lantern, turned it clockwise intending to switch it off, but its flames were stubborn and unyielding. He tried it several times, but to no avail. Eventually, he pried his body forcefully from his covers. He sat bolt upright and reached out for the lever on the right-hand side of the lantern. In one squeaking lift, he raised the glass up. Then, he puffed his cheeks with air and forced it out, blowing onto the exposed flickering wick and extinguishing the yellow tongues of the flames altogether. Gently, he lowered the squeaking lever back into place. The room became enveloped in total darkness, as dark as his

thoughts, of the unsynchronized drums of terror which had now inundated the entire nation and kept many souls restless. There was no telling when peace would arrive or life return to a new normal!

As Sam lay in his now darkened room, a hidden fear soon enveloped him . . . Fear of being attacked in his very home. No one could rescue him were that to happen; at least, not at night. That was why he unwillingly turned off his lights. Worse still, his assault of the previous day tremendously unnerved him. As he lowered his back onto his bed again, he pulled the covers above it, leaving only his nose exposed. While outside, an unnerving commotion remained, of people screaming and running from one corner of the estate to another, of sounds, of gunfire blustering in the night. Sam knew the GSU men were busy at work; though that did not make him feel safe, even if his apartment was owned by a man from the area. That truth was false hope. There was no safety or security for anyone anywhere. Rumour had it that GSU was harassing those who were native to the suburb.

Resting in his bed, Sam struggled to sleep. He could not to fully grasp the cause of it all, the national strife and mayhem, even if he *knew* why it happened. In the wakefulness of his night, he closed his eyes again, but his ears remained open, as wide open as a trumpet's flared bell and attuned to the drum bits of terror all around and about him. He listened to it all, the rickety and rackety of the tumultuous world, of blasting guns, something unheard of in Maraba. As he pondered the genesis of the clashes, he remembered a story his grandmother had told him long time ago. He was still a young boy then and an ardent attendee of Sunday school—a time when the Holy book meant something to him. It was a story in which King Solomon settled a feud between two mothers who were claiming ownership of one baby, akin to Kofi Annan's later role as an intercessor in the nation's feud.

It had been said that the two women lived under the same roof and had delivered their children within an interval of days. Unfortunately, one of the mothers had inadvertently slept on her own baby killing it and exchanged his child with the other woman's child. When the woman, whose child had been exchanged, woke-up to feed her baby, the child was dead. Later, she realized the child was

not hers; yet each of them claimed the living child as theirs. When the women took their case to the king, he said, "Get me a sword. They brought a sword before the king. The king said, Divide the living child in two, and give half to the one, and half to the other. Then the woman whose child was living spoke to the king, for her heart yearned over her son, and she said, Oh, my lord, give her the living child, and in no way kill it. But the other said, it shall be neither mine nor yours; divide it. Then the king answered, give her the living child, and in no way kill it: she is the mother of it.

As he thought about these things, Sam wondered what would become of his torn nation. Would his leaders take the choice of the mother who wanted to destroy the living child simply because hers had died? 'Would it be another Somalia?' A country where its citizens were bludgeoned to death and debased in debauchery, man turned against man, husbands against wives, or mothers forced to abandon their children? What then? He seethed with anger at this reflection. The truth was that his leaders had turned a blind eye to people's suffering, but only hoping to possess the coveted Head of State post—the Presidency. Sam's thoughts were halted by shelling sounds of gunfire outside—too close to his door; his teeth shuddered with fear.

When calm returned, his mind floated through a barrage of stereotypes he had heard in his formative years, labels that pitted man against man. One ethnicity and against another. Kikuyus against Luos, Maragolis against Bukusu. There was no ethnicity which was immune to it! He recollected the most outrageous ones: *If you want to know a Kikuyu is dead, just jingle money before his corpse. If he does not arise, he is dead. How do you distinguish a Luo man from the rest of the Kenyans? Serve him fish! You can always know a Logooli man or woman by the size of her tea cup. Place a kettle full of tea before her or him and you will find it upside down.* He chuckled at how silly some of these things were. Surely, these things did not define one; yet, they were a catalyst for a lot of discord among some of his friends.

Sam pushed these thoughts off his mind as he weeded through the thicket forest of his mind for happier times . . . Yes, the celebrated event of all events in Kakamega: the bullfight. His face beamed radiantly at this recollection. It was an event where droves of

people—young and old, men and women, regardless of political affiliation or ethnicity—became one. The *isukuti* drums of joy pounding hard to the jubilation of those in attendant . . . a memorable hoopla of men and women dancing and jumping around in an uncontrollable fever. Of young people dancing to the irresistible beat of *Isukuti* or running around brandishing sticks and singing jubilantly to the soloist's high-pitched voice:

Solo: *Ninzi ingoi, ninzi ingoi*

All: *Aaab, ninzi ingoi*

Solo: *Yeye woyio, ninzi ingoi*

All: *Aaab, ninzi ingoi*

Solo: *Yeye wooi, ninzi ingoi*

All: *Aaab, ninzi ingoi ya vakhaya*

kebu Makhaya; aaah, ninzi ingoi

Solo: *Vasatsa vatinya kwali ingoi*

All: *Aaab nizi ingoi*

Solo: *Vayai wooyi ninzi ingoi*

All: *Aaab ninzi ingoi ya vakhaya*

kebu makhaya, aaah ninzi ingoi

Solo: I am a lion, I am the lion

All: Aaah, I am the lion

Solo: Yeye woyio, I am the lion

All: Aaah, I am the lion

Solo: Yeye wooi, I am the lion

All: Aaah, I am lion they scrape;

Aaah, I am the lion

Solo: Hardened Men, we were the lion

All: Aaah, I am the lion

Solo: Oh dear, I am the lion

All: Aaah, I am lion they scrape; I am the lion

The *isukuti* drums! The whistles! The twigs! The chanting! All this added fury to an already fantastic occasion. Ingenious people, mostly young men, climbed on trees, lest they miss the coveted spectacle. The bulls, after being given a traditional brew, ran across the field as though possessed by a devil and ready for action, charging towards each other with a ferocious fury. People's jeering followed. Blaring horns and gongs mixed with the sound of loud songs, of *Ninzi ingoi wee! Aaab! Ninzi ingoi wee; Aaab ninzi ingoi wee*, was madness enough to drive any creature to the brink of lunacy. The slamming together of horns in a loud bang—the pushing of one beast by the other—a sheer show of force—or fighting over tariff. The music succeeded the bang.

Mwakula hena ijilishi?

Mwakula liina ing'ombe?

Mwinye mwalishiza ndina ijilishi?

Ing'ombe yenyu ni shimooli!

Where did you buy the bull?

When did you buy the cow?

How did you feed the bull?

Your cow is a calf!

Response:

Khuze Navalukova

Khuze khwegiza shimoli

Khuze khwaaya ijirishi

Lero mulore khwilabuuma.

Response:

We are Navalukova

We taught the calf

We taught the bull

Today see its fame

The drummers beat their *isukuti* beats feverishly. The horns slammed into each other with a loud bang repeatedly. Then, the dancing and the whistling and the jeering of men and women continued until the tempo of the event attained the highest fever. The losing bull ran off after its defeat, while the winner was led onto a victory lap accompanied by a riotous and jubilant crowd—and this commanded great respect, both for the bull and its owner. To Sam, what was memorable was not the actual bullfight, but its aftermath—the dancing and the celebration. Uuh! Uuh! Uuh! . . . What a lovely sight.

As these events floated through his mind, Sam lapsed into an insulted silence. As his mouth corners frowned rigidly with embarrassment, of having found joy in a violent game, lines of weariness around his eyes emerged. If only he could change the tide of time, witness another bullfight, what a joy that would be. Gradually, his eyes began to feel heavy under the hand of slumber. He tried to resist it, but it was useless. As he dozed off, he dreamt of going home to visit with his grandparents in the village.

Sam dreamt of going home, to his village of Mung'oma. He had not seen his grandparents for a very long time, a little over seven years. Though he was no longer a youth with a duffle-bag running away from home, he was a grown man accompanied by a wife. His dream was as vivid as it were, happening in his present.

As the duo walked on, the heat was relentless. They could feel it to their bones. All around and about them, they noticed how the grass had begun to show signs of drying-up; only dust-covered areas could be seen for miles. Farmers could not cultivate their farms to plant the New Year's crop. Too much bloodshed. Even the Almighty knew it. A bad omen for the New Year. Sam could barely remember much about his travel, but he and his wife found themselves on a dust-covered maram road that led to his grandparents' village. Once there, they walked hurriedly up and down the road which meandered and snaked through the once plush villages. They walked uphill, past the tea depot and turned right where the giant jacaranda tree once stood and now only a stump remained; it was the only significant landmark along their path to his grandparents. Then the road snaked downwards in a steep descent. Sam experienced a hollowness in his feet, as though they were about to buckle from under him. This descend was hard on his knees, but that did not bother him. He eased himself down the steep descent as gently as he could. It made him press on much harder with determination of his quest being to get to the Old Man. A bad thought crept through his mind: 'What if the Old Man was dead, and no one had told him? What would he do? Quickly, he pushed these thoughts off his mind. 'The Old Man couldn't be dead,' he consoled himself. 'He was as strong as an ox. That breed of men does not die quickly or easily.' The couple walked in silence until they made their way to the small Mmene Creek; its quiet murmur reminded Sam of how close he was to his destination. It was the first valley along their path to the Old Man's homestead. They were two only valleys on the way to his Mung'oma Village. The second one, Wa Mbuso, was much close to his home. Once they had

crossed it, they began another uphill incline. The climb was as steep as was the descent. Above them, they could see giant boulders of Maragoli Hills spread like giant mushrooms. Above the hills, the red sun rose and so did the familiar haze of heat.

Hurriedly, they walked, their feet stabbing hard on the hard dry murram road. They did not stop to exchange any form of greetings with those they encountered on their way. This was a bad sign. Logooli people believe that one can never be too busy as not to exchange a greeting with anyone. Sharp pebbles along their path made the journey painful at times, especially if they happened to stab a toe on one of the stones. That did not stop them one bit, for they were driven in their unprecedented journey. They paced with vigour, almost pumping their feet hurriedly; a cool wind gently brushed against their bare skin, a hardly significant distraction. The end was more covetous than anything along their path. And the sun continued to shine upon them unrelentingly.

As they drew close to Wa Mbuso Valley, Sam knew the end was near. Suddenly, he remembered the fury with which he had stormed out of his grandparents' home. The first time, he left to go to Bumbé Polytechnic. He left them standing by the doorway, puzzled by his sudden and unexpected rage; or was it his liberating freedom? He remembered how he had felt the couple's piercing gaze at his back, even if he did not stop to look back. He remembered how the hot sun had baked his forehead. He remembered the puddles of rain along his path. He remembered how he had played hopscotch with them to avoid dirtying his shoes. Then, he reflected on his last departure. The Old Man did not see him off. Neither did his grandmother, for they were both still asleep when he left. Today, there were no puddles, just swirling dust. The sun was not shining hard on his forehead, but right on his scalp, and it was sizzling hot. He had falsely assumed that the Old Man had been the one who had rejected him in his infancy. Yet, and in all honesty, the Old Man had been a guardian to the young lad who had simply allowed his mind to be corrupted by uncanny neighbours. His naïve mind yielded to their ill-informed temptation. Now, he was the one who had to bear the brunt for his stupidity. He had been paid for it alright, when he had

been accosted earlier on in the day. Would the Old Man accept him? He pushed these thoughts off his mind brushing them off as simply childish. He was now a grown man, a husband for that matter. Definitely, the Old Man could see that.

Together, the couple advanced. They were now within a block from the Old Man's home. Fear ambushed Sam. What would he say to the Old Man? Was there anything he could say to him to right his wrong? Could he tell him, 'Guga, I am sorry for behaving badly?' What if the Old Man rejected his humble request for forgiveness? Definitely, he could not go back to Maraba . . . At least not at that time. There was just too much strife. But that was besides the story. A mere apology would suffice, so he thought. Most of all, he had to tell him the truth of his life: He did not complete his diploma. Yet, again, he did not make the Old Man proud. He turned to his side and seeing his wife gave him peace. She was a sturdy petite woman, whose glimmering breath was the centre and the seat of his life. She seemed to make everything in his life seem right, even when it was not. As she walked alongside him, her sloping swinging shoulders and pelvic amplitude made her a much-coveted creature he had ever seen. She was more attractive than Nekesa, the woman who had contributed towards the failure of his dreams. Surely, his folks would adore her.

No sooner had they arrived outside the gate than they stopped abruptly. Sam scanned the familiar setting: the village still looked the same, with mountainous ridges that expanded for miles beyond the village and formed a protective shield around it. Only a few farming plains were visible. It was near noon. The sky was a clear blue, with no sign of rain anywhere. He turned to his left and glimpsed at his wife. Then, he moved his glance to the Old Man's compound. It had the semblance of peace, not like the turbulent feel of his Maraba suburb, which he had left engulfed in a bowl of fire. Suddenly, Sam had this burst of anxiety. What if his folks rejected his wife? What would he do then? Would he vow never to return again?

Slowly, and with his left hand, he reached out for Wanja's right hand. Gently, she clutched onto it. No words were expressed between them. She squeezed his hand reassuringly as though she had

read his thoughts. He turned and faced her. She gave him an assuring nod. Then, both turned to facing the gate. Right before them, stood the Old Man's grass thatched house. Its blue painted door was shut. There was hardly any activity going on in the compound except for the Old Man's two dogs running around in delighted circles. There was also a rooster chasing a hen and towards the edge of his compound, two of his cows were tied on pegs.

Next to the Old Man's house, was his grandmother's kitchen, a small grass-thatched hut. There was a chimney like smoke that forced its way through the gaping shutters of the kitchen. Its door was ajar. The old woman must have been preparing her afternoon meal.

Wanja squeezed Sam's left hand once more, which he took as a cue to move forward. But, for some reason, he could not. Instead, his body broke into a cold sweat. His heart began to pound profusely as though he had just completed a marathon, much like the one he undertook the previous day when he was savagely beaten, a pure case of mistaken identity. Both his hands became so sweaty that his left hand slipped out of Wanja's hand. He moved them to his bottom and rubbed them off his behind drying them off. While he was still in this discomfiture and transfixed at the gate, the door to the Old Man's door flung open. Out, emerged an image of an old haggard man. He was frail. In his right hand, he held a walking stick, which he used to support himself. His back was curved like a bow that one would have easily mistaken him for a hunchbacked man; but he was not. Old age simply made its mark on him. He was bold headed, with a thin band of grey hair around the edges of his ears and to the back in an almost even oval shape. From his glittering forehead, right to his nape, a clean paved road remained, as clean as a baby's bottom and glittered like the sun. At first glance, he appeared as though he was wiping his eyes with his hands. Perhaps one could have assumed he still had sleep matter in them. Then he started blinking them until the outdoor light overcame the look of constant indoor light clinging to them. At the sight on the Old Man, Sam's feet almost jelled from under him. Was it not for his wife, he would have collapsed onto the ground; if not, he would have run away, again.

As the Old Man took his first steps into the open, he noticed two strangers standing by his gate. Being old and his eye sight poor, he could barely discern who they were.

“Vaya!²⁴ Who are you and why are standing at my gate like stooges?” the Old Man said grumbly.

Wanja reached out for Sam’s hand and gently squeezed it for the third time, nudging him on.

“It is me Guga, Sam!” he said as he took his first step towards a compound he had vowed never to return. Wanja’s hand slipped from his as though it was an accidental slip.

“Is that really you?” the Old Man said again as he squinted his eyes struggling to see.

“Yes Guga,” Sam said dashing towards the Old Man. Still the Old Man did not recognize him. Besides, Sam was not the same boy who had left home in a rush to go to school. He was not the same young man who had left home while he was still asleep. He was not the same young man who had left without saying good-bye. He was not that boy. He had not only matured, but also gained so much weight that he looked like a fat toad—blame it on Wanja’s good cooking. That was not the only visible change of his physical appearance. He was now bald-headed, and his hair had begun to show early signs of greying. Only the sound of his voice remained unchanged. Thus, the Old Man did not recognize him outright, not until Sam was within inches of him. “It has been along a while Guga!” The Old Man did not say anything at first.

As soon as he had noticed who it was, the Old Man, as though infused with sudden burst energy, jumped with joy; his walking stick flew to the wayside. He embraced his long-lost son, while, in one powerful voice, yelled out for his wife using the endearing term: “Umukeelee²⁵!” But she did not respond! Perhaps she did not hear him.

“Umukeelee yo!” he said once more.

²⁴ Exclamation

²⁵ An elderly woman

“Umusakuulu²⁶. . . did you call me?” Sam heard his grandmother’s sweet sound. She was inside of her kitchen.

“Can you come here for a minute?”

A rather haggard elderly looking woman, with her hair wrapped in a black-and-white polka-dotted scarf, emerged from the kitchen wiping her hands across her bottom. Around her waist, she had tied a green wrapper with the map of Kenya smacked in its centre. At the base of her wrapper, there was an inscription which read: Celebrating Twenty-five Years of Independence—though it was way more than twenty-five years since Kenya had received its independence. No sooner had she stepped outside than she recognized her unusual visitors.

“Sam! Sam my grandchild . . . is it really you?” she said racing towards him.

“Yes Guku, it is me!” he said. When she reached where he was, he embraced her joyously. And on her face, tears of delight began to glide down her cheek.

“I am glad to see you my child. Turn around let me look at you!” the old woman said. “You have aged. You even grey hair.”

“It has been a long time!”

After all the re-acquaintance pleasantries were up, the old couple took their visitor into the house, thanked the ancestors for returning their grandchild home safely.

It was only after due thanks had been accorded to the Almighty that Sam finally thought it fitted to introduce his wife to his parents.

“Grandpa and grandma,” Sam said. “This is my wife Wanja . . . she and I have been married for seven years.”

“Wanja?” the Old Man said in a questioning tone. “Wanja?” he said again.

“Yes grandpa!” Sam said wondering if the Old Man had become hard of hearing.

“How dare you bring such an *abomination* to my home?” he said pointing at her with his walking stick.

²⁶ An elderly man

“Abomination? Abomination?” Sam said, almost sounding like his grandfather only moments ago and surprised by the Old Man’s response. Sadly, Sam misjudged his grandfather. He had thought if anyone would understand why he had married a woman from another ethnic group; his grandfather would, but he was wrong.

“Abomination?” Sam repeated the word again and again and again. All his senses dulled with the thought that the woman who had held the centre seat of his life was rejected by his grandfather, just as his own father had rejected him. “Abomination! Abomination! Abomination!” he mumbled. Before Sam’s dream came to an end, before he knew whether his grandmother’s would intercede on his behalf, he heard a loud bang on his door.

“Abomination!” the word slipped off his lips for the final time as the tapping on the door persisted.

When he finally emerged from his stupor, he heard a distant banging on his door. It was already in the morning. He could tell because he could see the sun’s rays penetrate deep into his bedroom through the cracks in his window.

He reached out to his right to wake-up Wanjia so she could open the door for their visitor, but she was gone. Somehow, he had forgotten she was not home.

‘Who is it?’ he wondered, as the knock on the door persisted.

Begrudgingly, he hopped out of his bed, pushed the sheet that separates his bedroom from his living room to the side as he made his way to the door.

He turned the latch on his door with a click. Before he could turn the knob to open the door, someone had beaten him to the punch. Right before him, there stood a group of four haughty and boisterous young men. They were different men from those who had accosted him previously. These were some of the men he had seen regularly and had run into at least once in a while in the Estate. They were not really friends of his; just acquaintances.

Suddenly, Sam realized terror had finally sounded in his own flat.

“Where is she?” one of the men said.

“Who?”

“You know whom we mean!”

“Wanja!”

“She is not here!”

“We know she has to be in here!”

“Don’t lie to us, you imbecile,” someone said slapping Sam hard across his face. The other men had no time for cheap chit-chats with Sam, but immediately pushed their way inside his house, all the way to the bedroom. They ransacked the entire house. They could not find her. Sam was telling the truth, but the men cared less about truth. Had she been there, she would not have escaped. When they did not find her, they left, but not before warning Sam, “We will be back!”

This time, Sam had narrowly escaped a severe beating, but had he? With his wife still a target for senseless arbitrary marking, what could he do? He ground his teeth in disgust as he dropped upon his knees, folded his hand in a prayerful repose, and, for once, after a very long time, he prayed for his wife’s safety. He prayed for those who had fallen prey to the violence—be it Luo, Kalenjin, or Kikuyu. All ethnicities in the country—and the world at large he prayed for them. The Mighty one was bound to answer his prayers.

While Sam was facing his own challenges at home, Wanja's first days at Kuresoi were terror filled. She could not understand why she had become a prisoner in her own town. She could not understand why she had no place to call home. She could not understand why human beings, who had the propensity to do good, absolute good, also had the propensity to do evil, absolute evil. When a state of emergency was declared across the nation, those who were not at police stations were told to remain indoors. But were their homes any safe? If they did not heed the warning, it was their faulty if calamity befell them. Most people listened. Travelling anywhere in the country was dangerous; even with a police escort, there was no guaranteed security. No one, absolutely, no one was immune to danger. Not even men who had power. Not even women who had power. Not even the rich. Not even the poor. Like everyone else, Wanja did not have to be reminded of that. She knew and understood that truth and her reality; she was vulnerable, like everyone else.

Wanja's family, which had not left home, was under lockdown. They could not go outside their compound. For their safety, they paid some young men, sympathetic to their plight, to keep a vigilant watch over their home and guard their lives. Still, they could not sleep; tension mounted within them to the sounds of raving gunfire outside their door.

When the sun rose on the second day, it brought with it the stress of the day. They received word that both Nico and Wanja were already at the station. They did not feel safe there either, for they were still outsiders. Nothing changed—tension remained, and fear became a norm. At nightfall, Wanja's parents were still guarded by those with whom they had forged a security pact. That night, they buried their family treasures in the sand in their backyard, hoping to retrieve it after the clamor of violence ended. The next morning, the police escorted the family to the station and reunited the family.

That day, treacherous swirling winds ensued, sweeping everything in its path. Most people at the station felt twice victimized. Some watched the little they had swept under the twirling eddies of the wind. Luckily, very little rain followed in its aftermath, for they had to sleep under the open to the horrid nightly chills that settled in after dusk. Not to mention, the mosquitoes that feasted on their exposed skin nightly.

Days came and passed. Nothing changed. Weeks came and passed. Nothing changed. The internally displaced people still stayed at the station. Months came and passed. Nothing changed. Soon, when the bowels of the heavens opened up, illnesses settled in with a vengeance—children suffered from malaria, grown-ups suffered from malaria, others were struck with dysentery, typhoid and diarrhea. Even when they were given tents for shelter, maize, beans, and peas, for sustenance, their problems remained. Eventually, they

adjusted to their squalid living condition . . . And that was before Nico vanished!

Several weeks later, after Sam was confronted in his house, he sat in his living room dazed, while distantly he listened to the radio. He did not pay attention to what the reporter was saying. His door was ajar and already the morning seemed oppressively hot. From where he sat, he felt the warmth of drafting wind as it brushed gently across his face and his entire body. The air was not only hot and humid, but also musty oppressive. His eyes gawked outside through the open door. Through it, he could see how the grass had wilted, and the trees wore a tired look. For this reason, and only this reason, he had no intention of leaving the house. He was not alone. Even though the GSU had left Maraba, many people were still held as prisoners in their homes. No one barred them from leaving; they chose to do so, preferring the safety of the indoor, than the uncertainty of the outdoors. Those brave enough to venture outside bore witness to the residual effects of the clashes in silence. Left in its aftermath were vestiges of people's charred homes felled into a pile of rubble and scattered debris of unusable personal effects—crushed cups, broken pots, pans, tea kettles, muddy clothes. Sam felt a choking lump cropped-up in his throat as he thought about these things.

Having no desire to go out, Sam buried his head in the back of his chair and closed his eyes. His ears remained attuned to the radio, the only link he had to the outside world. Reports of torture in other parts of the country engulfed the airwaves. On Voice of Kenya (VOK), the announcer was saying:

"More than 120 people have been killed in the country. Angry opposition groups have clashed with police and rival tribal groups after President Kibaki was hastily sworn in for a second term despite fierce accusations of election fraud. The country is sliding towards civil war."

"Police have opened fire on supporters of opposition leader Raila Odinga, killing scores of people who were protesting against alleged fraud in the election that returned President Kibaki to power on Sunday."

"In the Nairobi slum area of Kangemi police pulled members of the Luo tribe out of their corrugated tin huts and even assaulted pregnant women with their wooden batons. There are reports of many deaths elsewhere—in the town of Kisumu in western Kenya, the government is rumored to have signed an arrest warrant for Odinga because he has challenged the election outcome and announced he would have himself inaugurated as "the people's president" on Monday on Uhuru Square in the center of Nairobi."

"In Eldoret, Burnt Forest—women and children were burnt to death in a church—Londiani, Naivasha, kuresoi."

Sam listened to the news with an aching heart and remained benumbed by it. What power could he garner against the machinery that orchestrated the violence in the first place? He was merely a fly in the sea of chaos.

When his thoughts took flight to Wanja, he mumbled: *'If only she were here! If only she were here!'* What a difference that would make! Perhaps, she could have comforted him. Perhaps, they could have comforted each other! The truth about the matter was: She was gone and there was no telling when she would return. There was no telling when peace would return. There was no telling if any of his neighbours would return. So, he withdrew farther and farther into loneliness. His heart ached for the void he now felt. His heart ached for those who were suffering. His heart ached for those who were forced to sleep under the open sky. His heart ached for those who had perished.

It was during this time that Sam reflected on the last moments he had shared with his wife before they parted that morning.

He remembered how that morning he lay lazily on their bed as she got ready for the market. He listened to her in and out motions as she prepared breakfast. When it was ready, she set the table . . . It was almost seven in the morning.

"Aren't you going to have tea with me?" she said.

"No, not now," he said, stretching his body. "Perhaps later!"

Wanja poured herself a cup of tea as Sam watched from the bedroom. She took a sip of her steaming tea in silence as though it was the only best thing in her life. She could feel its warmth as it glided down her throat. She felt it too all over her body by each sip

she took. Outside, the sun was already up, but she felt unmotivated and in no hurry to go to the market. She was not alone. Sam was still resting in his bed face-up and too tired to get up or ready himself for work. He wished he did not have to go out of the house that day, but both he had no choice in the matter. Had they been rich, they could have simply stayed home.

As these thoughts floated on his mind, Sam regretted why he had not had that breakfast with his wife.

“Sam,” she said, moving the tea cup to her lips. “I have to go to the market early today!” She paused. Silence followed. She took another sip of her tea and returned the cup on the table. Still, silence remained between them. Sam just lay there, face-up. She wondered what he must be thinking, but could not tell. Perhaps it was about his business dreams. Or was he counting the beams on the roof? He did not twitch a muscle to look at her. She took another sip of her tea. She turned her head to look at Sam once more. It was clear his mind was cloistered with a deep thought. Though the two inhabited the same space, they were as distant as they were together.

When he finally spoke, they talked about the elections and how peaceful the exercise had been when they queued to cast their ballot. There was no pushing, elbowing or shoving of people. Each man and each woman waited his or her turn. People chatted with one another with ease. The wait, though long, did not seem to matter at all, only the end counted.

Sam and Wanja, like everyone else in the nation, remained optimistic about the outcome. As opposition supporters, they hoped for a new dawn. They were certain their man had a more than fifty percent chance of clinching a win. Though, deep down, in their hearts they knew, whether the opposition won or not, no significant changes would occur in their individual lives; though they had to remain optimistic. Little did they know that when ‘change’ did, happen, it was not the kind they had anticipated! Nobody anticipated the catastrophe that followed the “change.”

As he sat in the oppressive heat of his flat, he reminisced of how she hurried through her morning that day.

“What is your hurry this morning?”

Sam's question was rather foolish, but Wanja simply said: "The earlier I go, the sooner I can return."

"I was hoping you and I could go to the farm today . . . check on those men we hired to weed the sugarcane," Sam said, changing the topic.

"Why don't you that . . . Am sure you do not need me for that."

"I know I don't, but your company would be great. You always seem to know what to say or do."

"I see!"

"So you don't want to go with me?"

"No, that is not it. I have to earn a living for both of us."

"But our cane is important too!"

"In deed it is, but before we can harvest it, we still need to eat."

"It is settled then. I will go to the farm the day after tomorrow, not today. Kamau and Koza had a little job for me."

"Alright then!"

Then silence fell between them. Sam thinking of how he wished he could uproot all the sugarcane from his farm—during the last harvest, he had been swindled off his harvest. The Mumias Sugar Company had taken over ninety-nine percent of his profit—out of forty-five thousand the farm yielded, he was only given nine hundred shillings.

'The crooks deserve to go to prison,' he mumbled under his breath and grinding his teeth in disgust.

"What?" Wanja, who had overheard him, asked.

"Nothing!" he said, his eyes darting to the right stealing a peek at his wife and then left like two mice who had lost their way home.

"Bring me something nice from the market!" he said jokingly.

"Put some money here," Wanja said, opening the palm of her hand.

"You know I don't have it"

"Alright then, see you this evening!" That was the last conversation Sam had with his wife.

Sam watched her open the door, as a cooling draft swept through their flat. It was cool and soothing, unlike the musty air inside the house now. Already, the sun had started to steal its peek across the

horizon, for Sam could see its rays permeate his bedroom through the door. ‘What a beautiful morning!’ he thought, but he was in no hurry to leave his bed.

As memories of his wife faded, Sam still sat in silence, wondering whether she was alright: ‘She has to be alright,’ he mumbled to himself even though he had no way of knowing. He could not contact her, and neither could she with him. He had lost his phone the day the clashes broke. Now, he was left to languish in bitter agony of not knowing whether she was alright. So he remained in his room, as a throbbing and twisted anger ambushed him like a bad poison. There was no justice in this world—the innocent pay for the mistakes of a few crude men.

That morning, as Wanja walked outside, there was nothing unnatural about daybreak. Already, the sky was bright and promised to be a pleasant morning; there was no sign of rain—for the sky was not heavy with clouds. Though for Kakamega, that did not mean much. It always rained be it on market day or not. Though, from her vantage point, there was a sheer golden glow on the horizon as far as her eyes could see. Yet, even with that peacefulness, she dreaded the half hour trek to town to replenish her food supplies. If only Maraba suburb was not in a valley, she could have called one of the *Boda Boda* boys to take her to town, but it was out of question. *Boda Boda* cyclists seldom carry passengers into town from Maraba, even if it were a child. The steep incline into town presents tremendous challenges to bikers, the huffing and puffing uphill makes even the most determined cyclists to give up cash to save their strength. She remembered a story of a woman whom a *Boda boda* boy had insulted because of her weight: ‘Mama, I can’t carry a cow on this bike!’ She smiled nervously, for she was not a slender woman herself.

Ever since Sam and Wanja were separated, he had plenty of time to think—from his childhood to his current state of affairs. Though it was to his formative years, he returned repeatedly, or every now and then. Whenever he sought to find meaning in his life, he thought about his grandfather. Such was the case when one day, as he sat in solitude, Sam recalled an incident that happened long time ago. That was when he was still under the tutelage of the Old Man—his moral guardian. It was about an important man who had been killed. Sam was still too young to understand the gravity of the assassination. On the day in question, the Old Man returned home with a long tired face. He looked so disheveled—with clothes soiled—as though he had been in a terrible fight. As he walked, he took short sluggish steps, as though he had been in a scuffle and had lost all his will power to his opponent. Yes, he walked listlessly into the house, took off his coat, and walked back outside. He made his way to his favorite chair under the shade of the gum tree. He dropped his lethargic body into his wicker chair like a log and withdrew into silence. He leaned his head to the back of the chair and closed his eyes. That must have been 4:30 p.m., and the sun was not too hot; an occasional drifting wind passed, soothing his brow. Sam watched the Old Man with dismay, not daring to probe his mind with useless childish questions of what nagged him. Instead, he observed proper decorum—of knowing his proper place as a young lad—and he did know his place.

Because his grandmother had gone off to the market, it was only noble when Sam offered to make the Old Man some tea.

“Guga, would you like some tea?” he asked the Old Man, hoping a steaming cup of tea would sooth his troubled mind, but loathing the hardships that accompanied its preparation.

The Old Man did not respond as though he had not heard the young man’s request. He neither stirred nor moved a muscle.

A rooster, which was loitering around, crowed. The Old Man unwillingly pushed his eyes half-open, took a quick glimpse at the fowl and then let his eyelids fall back into place, sealing any glimmer of hope for interaction between him and his grandson.

The young man watched him silently. “*Guga*, would you like some tea?” the young man persisted, not knowing what else to do.

Hearing that, the Old Man, once more, forced his eyelids half open. From the corner of his eyes, he stole a peek at the young man, an act that reminded him of his intrusiveness. He rolled them towards the direction of the rooster, but it had slightly moved further away. Then, as though on second thought, he nodded his head with a wink. The young man smiled. The Old Man’s facial expressions remained unchanged—emotionless.

The boy turned, hoping to make his way to the kitchen. But, before he could take his first step, before he could decide whether to get milk from the main house for preparing tea or start the fire first, he heard the Old Man say gruffly, “Could you please bring me the radio first?” the statement was a cross between a command and question. The boy turned to looking at the Old Man, but his eyes were completely shut. The boy turned away from the Old Man as he made his way towards the house. After he took a few steps, he stopped abruptly in his tracks and simply shifted his entire body to take a second glance at the Old Man. His posture was unchanged. His massive body was pushed deep into the chair as though, with that one simple act, he would vanish from the face of the world. His head face-up was tilted toward the back of the chair. And his arms were crisscrossed slightly above his abdomen; while his legs were lazily spread apart.

“Whatever happened to him, only God knew,” the young man mumbled as he turned to go on his errand.

Needless to say, he walked into the house and reemerged in pronto dangling, in his right hand, an old beat-up dusty blue Sanyo radio. The air outside was cool, breezy, and soothing. The rooster from a while ago crowed again. The Old Man begrudgingly opened his eyes again as though insulted by the rooster’s intrusiveness. He

shifted his weight in the chair, pried his body off it, sitting bolt upright.

“Here you go!” the young man said, handing him the radio.

The Old Man reached out for the radio. He did not say a word . . . at least for a moment. Then, on second thought, he mumbled, “Thank you!”

The boy did not say anything.

“Could you please chase that thing . . . That rooster away from here?” he said without even looking at the boy. The boy did as he was told. Before he could make an expeditious exit, he watched the Old Man just for a fraction of a second and then walked away, vanishing behind the kitchen door.

Once alone, the Old Man placed the radio on his lap and began to fumble with its dial. He had a difficult time catching a station. The signal on his Medium Wave station was so weak that all he could hear was inaudible noise. Slowly, he glided his right hand towards the right side of the radio. Reaching out for the tuner, he flipped the switch to the Short Wave setting. He fumbled again with the dial knob, but not much changed. Muffled voices emerged from the speakers. He flipped the switch back to Medium Wave and glided the dial knob to the right. This time, a soft voice of an announcer came on, but it was too faint for him to discern what it said. Then, reaching out for the silvery antenna on the right side of the radio, he pulled it out. He shifted the positioning of the radio on his lap. And what do you know! There was magic. The station was so clear that he could not believe it! The one and only national station, VOK, which was his favorite. At first, he only heard beeping sounds—Peep! Peep! Peep! A faint smile formed across his face. Beads of perspiration began to appear on his upper lip. He wiped them off with his left sleeve.

Then, a clear voice, as clear as a bell, emerged: “*Na hii ni idhaa ya Taifa ya Sauti ya Kenya, Nairobi. Hivi sasa ni saa kumi na moja kamili.*”—This is the voice of Kenya, Nairobi. It is now 5:00 p.m. sharp.

The Old Man shifted his massive body in the chair, once again, and reclined in it with his ears in rapt attention. This time, he made no effort to close his eyes. His face had a slight beaming quality to it.

*“Na ifuatayo ni habari kwa ufupi”*²⁷

The Old Man’s attentiveness at this point was noticeable.

*“Kutokana na kifo cha Bwana Tom Mboya aliyeuliwa leo, ghasia nyingi zimezuka katika Mkoa wa Nyanza—sehemu za Kisumu! Wananchi mnaombwa popote mlipo mtulie.”*²⁸

Hearing that, the Old Man switched his mind off the radio. He did not hear anything else the voice said, for he had been among those people caught in the Kisumu scuffle. What an absurdity! He slumped back into the chair and withdrew into a prolonged silence. The smile upon his face was gone. His forehead furrowed in a serious expression. No one, and absolutely no one, could imagine the festering wrath on his mind—an innocent man destroyed for a no-good reason, a man who could have become the beacon of an emerging democracy. Later, when the newscast on VOK was over, he played once more with the dial only to land on a British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)—that was on his Short Wave station. The announcer’s voice on BBC was much somber than that of VOK: *“One of Africa’s youngest and most brilliant, Mr. Tom Mboya, was assassinated.”*²⁹

As for the boy prepared the tea, he only heard broken pieces of news, of how a man he later came to know as Tom Mboya had fallen prey to an assassin’s bullet at the tender age of 39—that was July 5, 1969.

As the news of the day unfolded, the weight of that truth pushed the Old Man further to the brink of isolation. Even when the boy served him his tea moments later, he drunk it with a detached interest . . . Something he knew he had to, lest he insult his budding grandson’s kindness with a refusal. So, as he drunk his tea, he thought about the fallible nature of humans, whose thirst and hunger for power cloud their conscience, forcing them to throw humanity overboard. He also thought about how people who commit murder

²⁷ The following is the news in brief.

²⁸ Following Mr. Tom Mboya’s death, chaos has erupted in Nyanza Province—in Kisumu. All citizens are requested to be patient

²⁹ From “An Evening with Tom Mboya,” presented by Kenya National Commission Human Rights.

are sacrilegious; for they devalue the sanctity of life, putting personal gratification at the center of their universe. Such people walk with a colossus swagger.

That young man was no longer a lad; he was a full-grown man, reflecting on that one single event with bitterness—an event that transformed his feeble Old Man into a bitter vengeful human being. Yes! He remembered how he had told him of the violence he had seen when he had gone to Kisumu on the day of the assassination. He remembered the riots. He remembered how he described men senselessly attacking each other, some who were simply accidental victims of one single man's act of selfishness and malice. Yes, he remembered all. He remembered the Old Man telling him how he had to run for his life—"Anger knows no boundaries my child!" the Old Man said in a sad tone. He remembered the Old Man telling him that the country's peacefulness had been shattered by the assassin's bullet, just as much as its victim had vanquished by it.

For Sam, an adult now, and not under the tutelage of the Old Man, *knew* for a fact that the tumult the Old Man had faced that day was no longer alien to him. For he too had faced the clutches of barbarity when he was nearly killed by riotous thugs the day the clashes broke. The drum bits of terror had beckoned too close to home . . . There was no more to say. No prayer, no matter how earnest could revive the dead, forever gone.

Sam remembered how he had felt when he left the house for the first time to witness the aftermath of the clashes. Immediately he stepped out of the house, stares of distant people followed him solidly like a wall, impenetrable behind, which they turned back after he had passed searching for another victim to intimidate. Those victims were not few. He knew and understood why! He did not have to be told about it. He did not speak to anyone; they did not speak to him. His lips were held tightly together as though glued by sap from the gum tree; and his large round eyes, as round as Sodom Apples, gaped at them with a curious dull brightness. Then he nearly bumped into a man. The man was fierce looking. He stopped abruptly as the man inspected him up and down, up and up, again and again and

again. When his eyes finally settled on his feet, he noticed they were bare and caked in red dust. His toe nails were curved like a bow, while underneath the tips of his toes were covered with dust too. Had it been a rainy day, he would not have noticed them. He counted his toes—one, two, three, four, five, six, seven—in a glance of toughness and anxiety. The man left him alone. Sam walked on, looking at what was left behind in the aftermath of the conflict. He knew he could not wander off too far; after all, there was still a curfew. Failure to observe it carried with it the danger any sane human being would not dare to experience, the hard way!

When the New Year came, no one noticed. A sheer blood bath of terror already engulfed the nation. Although a curfew was in effect, forcing people to stay indoors, it was rumoured that, in other parts of the nation, Nakuru and Naivasha, it was a ploy used to keep the innocent for unfathomable slaughter.

Fear bred fear, a wrenching feeling of mistrust among people. It bred misery throughout the land, the kind that turned sane men into capricious beasts of terror devoid of reason and conscience, or devoid of the brotherhood of humankind, neglecting their own humanity. For if only humankind embraced its humanity, what justice would one have in dousing another with kerosene and watching the victim's body become charred black like a marshmallow at a bonfire. What just cause would one have in stabbing another with a poisoned arrow indiscriminately?

If only conscientious men, governed not by the venom of their tongue, but the prudence of their thoughts and action, or those tamed by other's rhetoric of division, they might see reason in the muck of utter confusion.

The nation's youth, whose conscience yielded to venomous manipulation, saw nothing wrong in their destructive actions; for in their view, they had cornered their lion and all that was left was a spear to complete the job. Unfortunately, the lion would soon take a bite at them.

The police unleashed dogs on the defenceless. When they opened the doors of steel, they showed no mercy to the unguarded who marched through the streets of Nairobi, Mombasa, Nakuru, Kisumu, or Kakamega. The youth, in their protest, hoped to stage a peaceful protest for the unjust adjudication of the result from the election. Yet, had they not simply been lured into a trap without an escape route? Or had they simply drunk the opium of political manipulation laced with the poisoned promise of hope and unfettered freedoms? How could one quell such a grand movement?

From the moment they set foot at the police station, Wanja, and many other displaced people in Kakamega town, knew it was going to be their temporary home for a very long time. They were cut from everyone and everything that mattered in their lives—from simple material things to the pure comfort of a home, clean, safe and secure and most of all, food. There was not too much to do. Every day, when they rose-up at dawn or when dusk fell, and night time emerged, they had nothing to do. They sat and brooded about their loss. In the morning, when the desire for a stroll entered into their psyche, the displaced aborted it with the swiftness and speediness of lightning, as though the idea never crossed their minds. Walking and strolling anywhere was a cancerous cyst of their everyday life. They could not leave the compound for they had become prisoners in their own country. When the sun went down and the eeriness and creepiness of darkness emerged, the rampant threatening whispers, the nightly cooing sounds of the owl, or the irritating crickets, made their hearts cringe in fear—if only it was dawn, if only it was dawn. Though when dawn came, nothing changed. At night, when they slept under the open sky exposed to the elements of nature, they could barely see beyond their nose. When the nightly draft swept over their exposed skin, their bodies shuddered in its nippiness. They had no blankets. They had no mattresses. They had nothing. No basic needs. For sustenance, they lived on maize and beans and water and nothing more. They had no privacy. They had no bathroom. They defecated in the same place where they lived and slept. They used ‘flying paper’ as a toilet, which they threw over the fence. These discomforts simply reminded them of the value of life, that which they had lost in a twinkling. Inwardly, they consoled themselves: It could have been worse. So days came and passed, but the unrest remained. Weeks came and passed, but nothing changed. Months came, and they, too, passed, but nothing changed.

When he rains came, the Red Cross brought Wanja and other displaced people tents, beans and peas. Then diseases broke . . . Children became sick with malaria. Older people caught cholera. Those with weakened immune system, too, contracted malaria or cholera. They could not go to the hospitals for obvious reasons. There were no doctors to attend to their sick. When the Red Cross doctors later intervened, it was too late for some of the patients. The weak ones already succumbed to their illness. Those who beat their sickness remained weakened by their experience. Nothing changed beyond that. Another month came and passed. Nothing changed. There was talk about the displaced people going back to their homes after the coalition government was formed. “What homes?” some wondered. Nothing changed. They were still displaced.

Then, one day, a Man of the Law came and told them: “You are going to be compensated for your loss.” That was in April of 2008. Wanja’s face perked. Faces of the displaced perked-up with delight. “There was one condition,” the man said. “You have to return *home*.”

“What *home*?” someone mumbled.

Fear returned. They had no homes. Their neighbourhoods were destroyed. Their neighbours did not want them . . . That had not changed. The coalition government did not do anything to make life better. That was a fact. They had nothing! That was a fact. Money could not fix what they had lost. That was a fact. Money could not mend wounded hearts! That, too, was a fact.

When time for compensation came, the Man of the Law returned. He was not alone. He was accompanied by a tall well-built stern looking thirty-seven-year-old policeman. He was dressed in a well-pressed starched police uniform with his pistol securely resting on his left side. To complete his official look, he had on a hat with its insignia and inscription—‘*Utumishi wa Wote: Kenya Police.*’ The man’s name was Okongolo, whom people quickly nick-named ‘The Guard.’ He was of the service to ‘all.’ The Man of the Law did not go into any chit-chats with the displaced. He had a purpose for his visit: To deliver a message to camp-dwellers before the day’s end. It was compensation for their loses: Ten thousand shillings, maize and

beans. This was too little of a compensation to cause a change in anyone's life. People's faces frowned with displeasure.

"Look here Mister, I lost everything!" someone protested. "*Ten thou* . . . won't do me any good. I lost my wife. I lost my child. I lost my house. I have nothing!"

"Take the money," The Man of the Law insisted.

"If you don't take it, you'll get nothing!" Okongolo, the Guard instructed.

Dull eyed, the man who had protested looked at the two men with disbelief and disgust. "You don't understand!" the man insisted in a trembling voice. His eyes were blazing with rage.

"Oh, but I do. Don't you . . . Okongolo!" Okongolo nodded his agreement.

"No! You do not understand. How could you? Just how could you understand? I lost everything . . . That money can't fix my life. It can't feed my family . . . Not even for a week," the man said and walked away in disgust. A few others who felt the injustice in the offer followed him.

"Foolish men!" The Man of the Law mumbled. An emotionless and stern-looking Okongolo only observed this saga. The men were out of earshot, and the Man of the Law's comment had no effect on them. Unfortunately, he had already done his utmost damage on their psyche. No other ridicule could have had a more devastating effect on them than the former.

Some people, lured by the temptation of money, remained behind to talk to the man. Only a handful of men accepted the offer, but reluctantly. Little did they know taking the money would have irreversible effects upon their lives. Little did they know their struggles, their real-life struggles were just beginning!

Later that day, after the Man of the Law and Okongolo, the Guard, had departed, the camp had the semblance of a house in mourning. When the sun set, leaving behind a haze to an overcast sky and the impact of its oppressive heat was all, but gone, the air became depressingly cool. Those who had sold their souls and birth rights for a meagre ten thousand shillings huddled together and spoke in hushed murmurs. Though they knew and understood they had been robbed in broad daylight, the temporary relief of having received something, even if it was minuscule, was some sort of vindication. Those who had rebelled sat in silence. Vivid memories of their loss returned. Nico was among those men who had refused the money . . . It added insult to injury.

When night time came, the sky was moonless, the clouds were dark, the wind menacing, and a nightly owl cooed. Mothers withdrew into their tents out of fear it might rain. Daunted children followed their mothers inside. The men stayed out in the open nursing a hurt too deep to comprehend. They did not have much choice in the matter. The tents that housed their families were not big enough to accommodate everyone, not much of a shelter. The tents swayed violently in the drifting wind. The men stayed outside and kept a vigilant watch over the tents and their families, paralyzed by the wrath of nature, paralyzed by the wrath of man against man. If only the moon had been up, it would have made all the difference, but the night was pitch black and menacing.

After the winds died down, Nico and a couple of his friends decided to do the unthinkable! They left the camp with the intent of going to their former domiciles to see if it was indeed safe for them to return *home*. Had the Man of the Law not said it was safe to return home? Had the radio also not announced the same? If it was safe for them to return, they had to confirm it to the rest in the morning. They wanted to be harbingers sent to survey the land, to affirm if the wrath of hatred had ended. As they walked out of the station, leaving

behind the only security they had known ever since the clashes broke, the night was now pitch-black. It was so dark that one could not see beyond his nose. Above the already darkened skies, countless spots of light appeared and disappeared intermittently. It was very easy for one to see the big dipper, but the men were not looking for it. Those who were still outside, peered through the dark struggling to see the men's formless bodies as they vanished from their view, and until they were swallowed by darkness. Some whimpered with sadness not knowing the men's fate.

The men walked in silence towards the main road like three perfect strangers. Although the tumult of the previous months had already died down, it was still freshly etched into their minds. Who could forget that? Even though the curfew had been lifted and the sounds of gun fire had receded, the threat of machetes had not been completely erased from their psyche. Not to mention the kerosene bombs. As for people's wrath, it was another unresolved issue altogether. Granted, there was no telling what people were thinking or feeling—privately. There was no telling how their neighbours would react to their *homecoming*. The mandate they had received earlier on in the day to return to their homes without much of a resolution of the deep seeded hatred, that had pitted neighbour against neighbour, husband against wife, still remained a double-edged sword in the hearts and minds of many, a malignant enigma. As the men got to the main highway, where the road teed, they turned right heading towards the post office. The road was dimly lit and snaked upwards towards the central district of town. There were no cars or buses cruising along the bumpy street. There were no peddlers selling their usual merchandise. The road was bare and exuded an element of eeriness, like an eeriness of a cooing owl. The travellers could feel it, deep down, in their hearts, but they simply disregarded it. As they walked steadily towards the town, they were careful enough to avoid stabbing their toes on countless potholes and artificial bumps that dotted the road to slow down lead-footed drivers. Then, unexpectedly, they saw two blinding lights heading towards them. Immediately, they became fazed by the approaching circles of sheer brightness. Nerves knotted their stomachs with fear. They stopped

instantly to assess the situation, as the circles of white drew closer and closer to them. The unmistakable purring sound of an engine, which had been faint, was now clear and distinct. As the car drew closer to them, they noticed it was a blue double-cabin pick-up coasting towards Kisumu. The driver slowed down as he drew closer to the men, as though he was about to stop, but then, on second thought, he raved the engine. The truck did not slow down. It zoomed past them like a torpedo, down the bumpy road. They heard grinding tires screech as the driver slammed hard on the breaks before hitting bump after bump after bump. Then, he pressed hard on the gas pedal, as though he were in the East African Safari Rally. The men's eyes followed the truck as it zipped down road. Nico heaved a sigh of relief as the engine rattled on. Only two specks of red came on and off in the darkened night as the driver pressed and released the breaks. The men followed the two specks of red until they receded into the hollowness of pure blackness, vanishing completely from their view. Once again, Nico heaved a sigh of relief. Disburdened of fear, the men sighed. Thank goodness it was at night; one would have easily seen beads of perspiration on each man's brow. After a sense of calm had returned to them, each man thought of aborting the journey, but lacked the gumption to do so. They pressed-on their uphill ascend towards the town. When they got to the Mlimani and Mumias junction, they turned left heading towards Mumias, hoping to take a short cut to Maraba suburb. There was one bright shimmering security light at the junction, with the advertisement of Mumias Sugar Factory, which lit the empty streets. There were no *boda boda* men pedalling up and down the road. There were no hawkers. In the daytime, this was their tariff. There were no homeless people loitering around. There were no *matatus* zooming on the roads, just empty streets; what a ghostly scene!

As the men trotted along the road towards the roundabout, they walked in mute silence. The night was still pitch-black, save for a few street lights that speckled the road. These lights were not very bright. Some did not have functional bulbs. Perhaps, some conceited sons of bitches liberated them. Or perhaps, the bulbs had burnt out and were yet to be replaced. Nonetheless, the faint lights still guided the ill-

fated travellers along their path, a path that led into darkness, as dark as coal, with only infinite specks of light that dabbled the depth of sky. The winds calmed down, making everything have a fever of an eerie quietness.

By the time the travellers had passed Yako Supermarket and the Standard Chartered Bank's entrance and were nearing the roundabout, they were startled by a sharp piercing whistling sound. Immediately, they stopped as their hearts, without notice, began to throb profusely like an unsynchronized tick-tock-clock. What followed was something they had not anticipated. It was a moment of utter confusion . . . They could not think, paralyzed by the noise. Another whistling sound sounded; this time, it was followed by an intense tight voice that said in a high pitch, *"Just where do you think you are going?"*

In that instant, the men became aware, for the first time, they were surrounded.

"I said, where do you think you are going?" the voice came again; it was ghostly and threatening.

Shocked, bamboozled, and befuddled, the startled travellers were speechless. As unexpected as the whistling sound had come, and before they had said a word to each other, the men were ambushed by a band of thugs. It all happened too quickly. The travellers took to their heels, running as fast as their legs could carry them. And running they did. They had no plan. They just ran in all directions—Nico heading for the market and the other two retracing their journey back to the station. They did not have the presence of mind to plan a defence or an escape route. Those two who took flight towards the station had to run up a steep incline back to the Mlimani Junction. They ran and running they did, huffing and puffing like donkeys. Their fate rested with the speediness of their legs. In the heart of darkness and their mind's eye, they had no other thought, but to run—little did they think of the potholes that dabbled the road. Little did they think of the bumps along their path. These minor distractions were unimportant to their safety. While, Nico, who had made his mind to head towards the market, God knows why, tripped on one of the bumps. His body flew into mid-air and flat landed on

the cold asphalt face down. Within seconds, two bodies slammed on top of him. The other two men, who were with him, did not even realize he was in trouble; even if they had, there was nothing they could have done for him. It was a case of man for himself—and God for us all. That was the last time they saw of him . . . at least that night.

Meanwhile, the other men ran without turning their heads to see if Nico was behind them. Each man thought of his safety first and how to evade the clutches of barbarity. That was all! They were lucky! They made it safely to the station, their security, unscathed. It was only at the time of their arrival, huffing and puffing like overspent donkeys, they realized Nico was not with them. Immediately, fear for his life fell upon them like a deluge.

Distraught by the truth that Nico might be in grave danger, the men alerted the guards; but the guards, like the men, were paralyzed and unable to do anything for him. So the men sat at the station with their heads to the ground. They did not speak to anyone. They just sat still and dumbfounded. The men were pale-face and haggard, as though they had seen a phantom. Numerous visible ashen lines of perspiration etched on their furrowed brows were evident. Their lips hardly practiced speech, and their eyes had receded upon themselves. Whatever had happened to them, only they knew it! Not because they were hiding anything, but they were in shock and could not find ‘the tongue’ with which to express their horror.

For a while, the men remained reticent, hoping Nico would return. An hour came and passed, but there was no Nico. Two hours. Three hours. He was still not there. Yet, they lacked courage to speak about what had happened to them. The night still maintained its menacing presence; only distant starry lights dotted the depth of sky. By the stroke of midnight, the men became restless. What if something really terrible had happened to him? They wondered, but they had no way of knowing—they paced the station—hoping and wishing daylight would return.

2:00 a.m. The dumbfounded men sat stolidly, their eyes gaping pensively into the still of the night. The air was not only still, but also dense and chilly. Occasionally, a biting waft whipped hard on their

exposed skin, but the men hardly felt its nippiness. Though they experienced this chilliness to the core of their bones and their teeth chattered, they remained unemotional and motionless. Around them, the wind swept through the blanket of men, women, and children who were under the spell of slumber to feel its intense cold. The men's minds were tormented by a hurt so deep that if left unchecked had the propensity of propelling them to do the unthinkable, but because they lived at a camp and were outnumbered, there was nothing they could do. Undoubtedly, there was strength in numbers and the numbers were not on their side. Distantly, sounds of the hooting owl broke the night's stillness. Above the sky, a multitude of starry rays showered the nightly sky. In their reticence, the men longed for dawn to usher in the glimmer of hope, a hope to bring Nico back *home*. Distantly, the owl continued its cooing, making the only sound of the night.

The next day, when darkness paved way to dawn and the sun peeked above the hazy Kakamega sky, it brought with it the uncertainties of displacement. Nico, who had vanished the previous night, had not returned to the station. No one knew his whereabouts, not even his friends who had accompanied him into the town the impetuous night. Not even his sisters and parents; they were all in the dark, real darkness, as dark and as bleak as their future. They pushed ill thoughts of his demise off their minds, believing in the power of positive thinking; though they knew his case was hopeless.

When questioned about their ill-fated journey into town the previous night, all the men could mumble were broken syllables of a journey which had ended in disarray!

“Eeeh! Aah! Aah! It was like this—too d-a-r-k to see!”

“I-was-was, too frightened to remember—just ran—that is, of course, I ran. Didn’t think!”

What more could one say?

Nico, the illusive Nico was gone and that was all there was to it.

Seventeen weeks, following the aftermath of the fracas, had come and gone, but people still lived in fear. By noon of the next day, rumors of Nico's missing took the station like a deluge. No one was more affected like his sister Wanja; the two were very close. When she got the news of his disappearance, she zonked out. Tempers flared and fell with no calm of hope. Though, for some, they could not let go of hope or optimism, especially for the young man's safe return. So they prayed for his safety and return. For hope sees the invisible . . . Hope sees and achieves the impossible. That, too, was true.

Throngs of men banded together to talk about the missing man. Women huddled together in whisper. And whispering they did, until the whispers became the buzzword of the station and remained for a very long time. As for the young ones—the children that is—were detached, but not immune to it. Their eyes saw what was happening, but they were not cognizant of it. Their ears heard every word, but they did not register the gravity of the situation at hand.

Two hours later, dark clouds hovered above the station like giant floating fluffy balls of cotton. Daylight turned into darkness and momentarily into daylight again as the fluffy balls glided with easy away from the sun. But the buzzing whispers of the missing man remained.

By dusk, camp dwellers, mostly older women and men, sat in the expansiveness of the open field watching the sun slip lower and lower, leaving behind strokes of red light on an almost faded horizon. Then, darkness settled in their hearts like lead, carrying with it an all too familiar intense fear that had swept over their souls during the clashes. The inevitable truth that Nico might never return home became ostensibly feasible. While younger women or wives, in their respective tents, cooked in silence. Occasionally, their unseeing eyes, dull and empty, gaped outside into the hollowness of the darkened skies and receded upon themselves. When the women later set their

supper, a joyous time for the displaced, families ate in silence, allowing their riveting third eye to ponder on their lifelong challenges and Nico's missing.

After most families had eaten their meager meals, the women and children retreated into their tents, at least, those who had tents for the night. As for the men, they organized a prayerful vigil of the gate, hoping their prodigal son would return. Lit candles of hope dotted the station.

Hour after hour, they watched the gate. Seven o'clock . . . They watched the gate. Eight o'clock . . . They watched the gate. Nine o'clock . . . Some candles began to die down, but the men still watched the gate. Ten o'clock, a figure of a man in uniform appeared at the gate. Those who were still awake, guarding it, saw him advance. He was carrying something in his hand, but it was too dark to recognize it. Another candle went out somewhere. Fear returned to the camp dwellers, but the man walked with timidity. His face was long, narrow and tired. Another candle, yet again, went out. Step by step, the man advanced into the camp towards the vigilant camp dwellers. His hair was unkempt and had the appearance of a man burdened by the world's troubles. The man was none other than Okongolo, the Guard; it was the very man who had accompanied the Man of the Law at the station the previous day. He was reporting on duty for his night shift—though he was more than reporting for his shift—his mind was heavy with distress. When he opened his mouth to speak, his voice was dull and raspy and his eyes were evasive.

"Good evening!" Okongolo said nervously as he approached the watchful men. He was fiddling with an object he carried in his hand, which turned out to be his hat.

"Good evening," the men stammered.

"Aren't you pretty late tonight?" one of the men queried.

"Yes indeed!" said the Guard. "I was held-up in town."

"Any news about our missing boy?" someone asked. There was silence. A candle went out somewhere.

"Well . . . umm . . . umm!" the Guard mumbled. Then, he paused, cleared his throat and swept his forehead with the palm of his left hand. "That is what I wanted to speak to you about?"

“Did you find him? Did you see him?” someone eagerly asked.

“Am not sure, but . . .”

“But what?” another voice said. “Well . . . Either you found him or you didn’t! It is that plain and simple.”

“Ahhh . . . umm,” he mumbled. Then, he quickly added, “Well, we found someone, or should I say a body?” There was silence. A candle went out somewhere.

“What do you mean?” someone queried.

“I was summoned to the hospital this evening.”

“Yes!”

“When I arrived, I was directed to go to the mortuary!”

“Well? Was it our boy or not?”

“I couldn’t tell . . .” there was silence . . . a pregnant silence. “The body was badly mangled that it was hard to tell if he was the one.”

“How will we know he is *ours*?” another voice queried.

“Someone, a relative, his father or mother, will have to identify him tomorrow.”

“Can someone inform Wahome Mutahi . . . He is the boy’s father, right?” someone asked, forgetting the man had just arrived.

“Indeed! Yes, indeed, he is the boy’s father,” someone noted.

“He needs to know!” the latter speaker added.

“Why didn’t you come to tell us sooner? We could have gone to identify him,” another voice said.

“I got the news late,” the Guard said. “Has anyone seen Wahome?”

“No, but he must be asleep right now,” someone said.

“He needs to know!” a voice said again.

“It won’t do him any good this late in the night. Let him sleep.” There was a slight murmur of agreement and disagreement. After minutes of deliberation, it was settled that the boy’s father, who was advanced in age, would be notified in the morning.

When the interrogation ceased, and the Guard had left the men to their own design, they sat in silence for a very long time. Even when all the candles died down, one after another and the station

become engulfed in darkness, as dark as the men's heart, save for the security lights, no one spoke. The men still sat, watchful and hopeful.

The next day, the sounds of chirping birds ushered in a dawn like no other. Already, the sun was making its gradual ascend of the eastern hemisphere radiating a warm golden glare, but the camp dwellers were slow in rising—for they had nothing to look forward to, but plenty not worthy of their remembrance. Most slept with their minds weighted by the whispers of the dead man. Others, who were oblivious to the insidious truth or who had not heard of it, went on with their own plans, and untouched by the tragedy.

As dawn paved way to morning, most camp dwellers awoke, yet again, to the truth that one of their own had fallen. The whispers of death were now a reality and had taken a firm hold of men's hearts and women alike. As for the camp, it was transformed into a place of mourning.

By eight in the morning, when Mr. Wahome heard a whiff of his son's demise, a shadow of inner pain overcame him. He collapsed, as his mind was cloistered in darkness. Thereafter, he heard nothing. He saw nothing. He felt nothing. He was dead in spirit and remained dead for a very long time.

In his hour of darkness, Wahome began to question everything—He questioned the very existence of God, wondering why He had given light to the suffering of his family. He wondered why He had not heeded their laments or his lament. He wondered why He had turned a deaf ear to their plight. In his remonstrance, he conceded that God was dead. Yes! He had to be dead! That is it. If God was not dead, how had He allowed calamity to befall his family? If He was not dead, why had He abandoned his family? If He was not dead, why had He abandoned his people? If He was not dead, why had He allowed the suffering of many in the nation? Yes! God was dead! Then, in hindsight, he mumbled to himself, 'Could it have been the folly in men's hearts that led to our misfortune?' He quickly pushed this thought off his mind. Instead, he wondered what would become of his family after life returned to normalcy in Kakamega . . . That is, if normalcy was even feasible. Would He come to their rescue? That was the biggest question on his mind, which remained unanswered.

That morning, Mr. Wahome, Wanja, and two of his other daughters went into the morgue and identified Nico's mangled body. The family had no place to lay his remains to rest. His father had no home. Nico had no home. His sister Wanja had no home. They had lost everything, and the sun was sizzling hot and relentless in its rising and setting.

Four months. Seventeen weeks. One hundred and nineteen days had come and gone. That was from the day Sam and Wanja were separated. That was a fact. Since then, his life was marred by the turmoil of a world gone mad, of a dark moonless sky, of a bloody burning disc of the sun, of a sunny baked landscape dry and cracked like the cracks on his heels, of an earth parched to dust. That was a fact. He had not seen or spoken to his wife in a while. That was true. Sadness consumed his every waking moment to the extent that nothing, virtually nothing, could have moved him through the gloomy interlude of his abysmal life save for the safe return of his wife. She was the only being he knew who could have moved him to a gradual ascent into the gleam of hopefulness, into the sunlight. That, too, was a fact. So he prayed day and night for her safe return, hoping that the Mighty one would have mercy on them.

Then one afternoon, as he was sitting by his doorway, with his head pressed hard on its wall, Sam saw his friend Achaga approaching his flat. He had not seen him in days. That was about noon, and the sun was at its zenith. He was walking with a limp in his left foot, which had sustained an injury when he was running away from the GSU men. In his hand, he was toying with his cell-phone like a child. His face was sweaty and glittered like the sun, as though he had run all the way from his burrow to Sam's flat. And perhaps he had. He seemed almost relieved to find Sam at home. As he drew closer to him, the muscles on his face tensed. His eyes were narrow and glinted lazily in the eye sockets. He feigned a smile, but Sam could see through him. It was not an all too familiar jolly smile he always had. After they had exchanged lukewarm greetings, Achaga handed Sam his cell-phone. He did not go into much detail, but simply shoved the phone into his hand.

"Here," he said. "Read it!" His tone was deep and stern.

"Why?" Sam questioned.

Achaga simply said, "Just read it! It is for you!"

“From whom?” Sam asked reluctantly.

“Who else,” he paused as Sam threw him a meaningful glance. “It’s from Wanja!”

At the mention of his wife’s name, Sam’s face lit up. He smiled broadly extending his right hand to receive the phone.

“Did you talk to her?” Sam said excitedly, his eyes away from the tiny cell-phone screen.

“No! She sent you an SMS message,” Achaga said bluntly.

Sam’s eyes gaped open. He was happy to receive a note from his wife. His joy was very obvious. Then, he started to read his message in silence; and this is what it said:

Achaga,

Tafadhali mwambie Sam kwamba Nico aliuliwa jana.

Mwili wake uko mortuary.

Wanja

As Sam read, the light in his eyes went out as a dizzying feeling came over him. Had he been standing, his knees would have buckled from under him. The SMS message was very clear, that: His brother-in-law, Nico, had been killed and his body was in a mortuary. The news was as chilling as it was startling. Immediately, his mind was plunged into sadness. Hot tears began to stream out of his eyes; hot and bitter tears flowed from his eyes as though the very spring of his sorrow had been touched in his body. He did not care about what people said about men who cried. It did not matter at all if people saw him shed a tear. Then, without notice, his emotions turned into rage. He ground and gnawed his teeth in anger and spat contemptuously on the ground. “Damn it! Damn it!” he mumbled more to himself than to Achaga. “Freaking contemptuous lunatics! How could they do it? How could they do it to him?” Unfortunately, Achaga had no answers for him. The culprits, who deserved the brunt of his rant, were not there to respond.

It was only later that day he learned that Nico’s assailants were unknown and, perhaps, will forever remain. That was late in the afternoon when Sam got this second piece of news. It became, yet again, another dark hour of his life. Though he had not seen his wife in a long time and could not comfort her, he felt her pain. Her pain

was his pain. So he just sat there, by his doorway, stupefied like a stooge, and defeated.

When he eventually regained his senses, he walked into his flat, fell into his chair, and cast his eyes to the ground; his mind was wrecked with so much hurt. Achaga walked behind him and took an empty seat right by his side. Though the two men were together, they were miles apart. They did not say a word to each other for a long time. Only God could understand their innermost thoughts. The men needed clarity of thought; Sam needed clarity of mind and soul.

A couple of hours later, when the two men talked again, they spoke in subdued tones about what was happening around them, about their fears, about the uncertainties of their lives, about their loss, and . . . Yes, about anything and everything else they deemed worth talking about, for as long as it kept their minds off the tragedy of Nico's passing.

"What would you like to do now?" Achaga asked.

"I am not sure," Sam said. He was right. A life had been lost, and emotions were high. He understood that and his problem was simple: He could not freely visit his wife at camp. Not because he was barred from going there, but he knew his wife's people might not be receptive to his visit. Even if his father-in-law knew he was a good man, he had had his lion share of misfortunes: He was assaulted; he had been forced out of his home, and he had lost his son. By association, there was no telling what such man could do to him, even if he had no hand in his son's death. He was a Logooli man; Sam understood that truth. Showing-up at camp, even well intentioned, might exacerbate his in-laws hurt. Common sense told him not to aggravate a searing sore; he followed reason.

"May I use your phone?" Sam asked his friend. "I would like to send her an SMS, too. Yes! I will send her a message!" he said affirmatively.

Achaga did not hesitate, but handed his friend the phone.

Sam took it, but stared at it for a minute or so. Gradually, he began to key in his message, expressing his condolence to the family.

Pole sana kwa kumpoteza nduguyo Nico. Kama kuna mipango yoyote, tafadhali nijulishe. Ningependa kusaidia vyovyote niwezavyo. Wape familia pole kwa niaba yangu.

He hit the 'send' button, handed Achaga the phone back and then waited for a response. Nothing came. An hour came and passed, but nothing came. Although he had hoped Wanja's reply would come sooner, it did not. So he waited and waited. Nothing came. A couple of hours later, they still sat in wait. No message came. Soon, Sam started pacing the floor, nervous that something may have happened to her too; he was wrong. Then, he heard the familiar cell-phone message alert tone sound. He stopped pacing and looked to his friend; they exchanged a meaningful glance, but hardly spoke. Achaga reached out for the phone and browsed at the message. He handed the phone to Sam. He read it silently and then handed Achaga the phone back. The in-coming SMS read: *"The family has decided to take Nico's remains to Njoro for burial."* That was it. Njoro was Mr. Wahome's original home. He had emigrated to Kakamega many years ago, long before Wanja was born. Except, there were two quagmires: One, travelling anywhere in the country was a nightmare. Two, it was unsafe for Sam to accompany the family to Njoro. He was not Kikuyu. Rumour had it that many westerners had been killed on the way to Nairobi. Even if Wanja may have wanted him to accompany them, his safety was paramount. He, too, could be killed in retaliation.

Before the glow of twilight was touched with darkness, before earth was embroiled in total darkness, Achaga took leave, hoping to get to his residency before nightfall. This was in spite of the lifted curfew. Even with the semblance of peace in Maraba, he had to exercise caution. Nico's death was a painful reminder of a world gone mad . . . That there were still a handful of uncouth men who had pledged to terrorize others, transforming their lives into a living nightmare. These crude hooligans took their punitive frustration on the innocent indiscriminately. Achaga did not, therefore, want the violence which had been vested on Nico to become his reality.

That night, after Achaga left, Sam hardly slept. He sat in his living room in the still of night with his head stooped to the ground, as though he were committing to memory every spec of details in his view. He thought about the events of the past four months—he remembered the euphoria that had preceded the election. He remembered the joy he had felt when he thought change in the country was a looming reality—a coveted change that would have miraculously ‘improved’ the quality of his impoverished present. That joy was a short-lived gleeful moment. He recollected the running, the repugnant smell of tire burning, and the killings following the disputed election. He remembered with dismay how he had been savagely beaten. He remembered how the giant had pinned him to the ground. He remembered how he had lifted him up from the ground, as though he were feather light. He remembered how he wet himself out of fear. This recollection made him realize that sometimes memory can be worse than an event itself. He spat contemptuously on the floor as these thoughts zoomed on his mind. He watched the blob of his saliva form a tiny wet ring on the dry surface. For just that brief moment, his parched throat craved something soothing—cool and chilling—like water, a Fanta, or *changaa*, the illicit drug of his adult life that had dulled his senses many a times. He remembered how he had not indulged in its tantalizing effect for a very long time. It was as though he needed it to forget whatever it was he could not erase from his mind. He recollected all those days he had indulged indolently in it many a nights; that was when he was a student at Bumbe. During those days, he thought it would quiet his sorrow, but, even then, he knew it offered him only temporary relief. As he craved *it* now, he knew he could not have it. He could not go outside . . . It was not safe. He was not ready to commit suicide. The only safe place was in the security of his home. So, he sat quietly in the still of the night, with his face lowered to the ground, knowing that anything could go wrong even there, right in his home, for there was no guarantee of safety anywhere, period! Hence, he sat and thought and thought and thought that if only a new dawn could come sooner, life could return to normalcy—but that was a scant hope . . . So he sat, alone, quietly, thinking.

An hour later, when he looked outside through his gaping window, the outdoor was dark. It was so dark he could barely see beyond his window-seal. Distantly, he could hear voices of people along the road, voices he deliberately blocked from his mind. At first, the voices were faint; but straining to hear, they became more distinct. Soon, he realized they were two deep masculine voices saying:

*“Tembea haraka bwana giza lisbaingia!”*³⁰

*“Najua, bwana”*³¹

These voices faded from his memory as he blocked them off permanently, reverting, once again, to his self-imposed solitude.

His eyes glossed over his darkened room; the room encased him as a sinister silence enclosed him. Had he not been accustomed to the house, he would have probably bumped into stuff. When he rose from his chair and walked towards the window, he ambled carefully like a blind man. A cool gentle breeze brushed on his naked skin in a soothing sort of way. He reached out for the latch and pulled the window inward. It emitted a soft creaking sound. He pushed the latch into place and walked backwards towards the centre of his living room. Like a blind man, he felt his way, still backward, until he touched the thin cold sheet that separated his living room from the bedroom. He fumbled for a match and struck it to the lamp. A soft golden glow erupted, bringing a warm glow to the room. He walked back to his living room and deposited his body onto the chair like a log.

Sam did not eat that night. He did not do anything. When the gentle strokes of rain began stabbing at his corrugated rooftop, he did not hear it. Instead, his mind ebbed and flowed with an incessant anger born of his loss and a sense of loneliness, which had engulfed him since his wife had *left*. He had not experienced this solitude in a long time . . . Long before he married Wanja. Since then, Sam did not *know* loneliness. Since then, Sam was not lonesome. Now, he loathed this emptiness. Now, he bemoaned the loss of everything that had

³⁰ Mister, walk fast mister it is getting dark!

³¹ I know, mister.

defined him. He did not *know* himself. He felt like a quail in a quail trap. Even as the rhythmic strokes of rain continued to gently hummer his rooftop, he did not hear it; he only felt and understood the injustice of his life.

A half an hour later, Sam still sat in thought. He did not know what to do. There was a lot to ponder—from the prudence of paying his in-laws a visit at the station, offering them his condolences in person, to staying away. What nagged him, too, was the knowledge that going would put him in harm's way, and not going was unkind. He wrestled with this thought repeatedly. Was he ready to sacrifice himself for his wife's sake? What good would his going do; elevate his stature before his in-law's view? Was this worth the risk? He did not know. As these thoughts flashed his mind, his mind took flight to the Old Man. What would the Old Man do if something bad happened to him? Would he shed a tear in the event of his demise? If he failed to go, would he be labelled as an uncaring brute? Sam was not brute, but a man torn between the love for his wife and his safety. If he did not go, would Wanja understand? Meanwhile, the rains continued to fall steadily.

Sam wanted to do the *right* thing. There was no question about that, but what was the right thing? He mauled over this for a while. Even if he knew what *it* was, and *it* was innately etched on his mind, there was another powerful force compelling him in the opposite direction—a conundrum of a lifetime. This compelling force was more attractive than the former—life is precious! One ought not to take it lightly. So he just sat there, in his living room, his head pressed hard on the back into his chair—thinking, wishing, and hoping, while the rhythm of the night, of the hammer strokes on the roof, windows and doors of his flat continued through the night.

Then, something jolted him from his chair! He stood up and started pacing his room. There was a light that struck him, a far much deeper light than any external thunderous rumble. He remembered something he had heard from one of his Sunday school teachers in his formative years. Though he vaguely remembered the very context of his teacher's remarks, it was the message behind it that was poignant. The message resonated with him in this very hour of his

indecisiveness. His teacher had once quoted a scripture that said: *“I do not do the good thing I want to do, but do the wrong thing I do not want to do.”* Whatever the context, this was what most humans, knowingly or unknowingly, did. Sam was no exception. He wrestled with his mind some more. When he was certain of his decision, he picked his lamp, and walked towards his bedroom, behind the thin sheet that separated his two rooms. He placed his lamp on his nightstand and lowered his body on his bed face up. He did not bother to take off his clothes. He did not bother to blow out his lamp. He simply closed his eyes as the rains continued its rhythmic strokes on the outside. Even when the lamp dried-up and his light went out, he did not notice.

Three days later, Nico’s family left kakamega with his remains under a police escort for burial in Njoro. Sam accompanied them on this journey disregarding his own personal security. It was a long, trying and nightmarish saga without any semblance of peace, but for Sam, family trumped his self-personal-desires of personal safety. He saw the light, and that is what galvanized his decision. His wife was grateful Sam had accompanied her to Njoro. Her family returned to their Maraba home a couple of months after Nico’s burial. As for Sam, he was reunited with his wife for life, which was more rewarding than any personal discomforts he experienced along the way to Njoro for Nico’s burial. That, his act of self-sacrifice, in itself, was noble.

Months later, when the dust settled and the drum bits of terror had claimed many of its victims, Nature's wrath took its toll against humankind. In the western region of the nation, an acute drought erupted. January, February, March, April, the Divine one withheld rain. An inferno like heat descended upon earth destroying life. Streams dried. Plants dried. Crops died. Animals died. No vegetables. No food. No life. May, June, the effects of recent events were evident—farmers had fled their farms, withdrawing deeper into their ethnic enclaves out of fear. Ripe maize left unguarded in the fields was reaped by unauthorized men and women who took advantage of the unfortunate situation; some burnt or left it to rot. As a result, Cain's sins were visited upon the living. One by one, some succumbed to starvation like flies—others had near-death experiences. Nature's unexpected whip against every man was too strong to withstand. Prices of maize skyrocketed—the poor were unable to meet their basic needs. Was this vengeance? If so, whose vengeance? With the blood of the vanquished avenged, the living that turned humanity and land into a field of slaughter, bore the brand of the impudent sons of Cain.

With the vanquished long gone and their existence a mere memory of a distant past, the bitter lines of discord, unresolved, remained a mere straining enigma of a tumultuous present. Wanja's camp was disbanded, and most of its inhabitants had no place to call home. Only one family returned to Maraba suburb, but not for long. Others vanished as though they never were, as their whereabouts remained unknown. For where their homes once were, only ruined homes and empty lots remained. The nation's Human Rights Commission on truth and justice, the leaping hand of reconciliation, was paralyzed in silencing trumpets of terror, and left humankind hanging in the balance under the bedrock of a scathing live volcano capable of erupting without notice.

When the reforms and a vote for a new Constitution came, Wanja, like many others who had borne the brunt of the clashes, waited in the queue in eager anticipation to cast her vote. Even if she knew without her stall, it would be difficult for her to rebuild her life, she was still hopeful. That was 2010. Ahead of her was a young woman, dressed in a brightly-colored *kitenge*, readying to cast her ballot. Her deformed fingers were wrapped around her ballot. A shiny vivacious scar was stretched from right above her left ear to her lips. The entire left side of her face seemed to have melted away in a searing inferno. Seeing her, Wanja's mind began to conjure-up recollections of years past, from the hoopla and euphoria that had preceded the memorable election, the excitement she had felt when she stood in the queue to cast her vote and then the clashes happened! She also remembered the emptiness she felt being separated from Sam. All these things remained eternally etched on her mind. Then, she opened the petals of the lotus of her heart, seeking deep down, within herself hoping to find knowledge, a cup of knowledge, to give her wisdom and peace of mind. Yes, she now understood the fallible nature of all mortals; they are always partial, imbued with selfish desires. Perhaps, she was like most of them; if not, she was unlike any other being, infallible in nature. Now she knew she had to cast another vote, yet again, hoping a change was the only embargo to ethnicism. And yes, she did cast her vote . . .

As for Sam, after the calm had returned to his neighborhood and after he, too, had cast his vote for reforms, he had ample time to reflect upon his past. As he lay on his bed beside his wife, in the quiet of his solitude mind, a series of thoughts percolated: from the day he had asked the Old Man about his father, his schooling at Bumbe, his life in Kakamega, that chaos the ensued in the country after the elections, to his separation from his wife.

Even in his adult life, he had never stopped wondering what the son of a donkey who had fathered him looked like. His mother, whom he had disowned many years ago, had not been much of a help, for she still maintained she had been truthful in naming her partner, the very man who had signed an affidavit renouncing Sam as

his son. Still that did not stop him from wondering. Now, he remembered, with dismay, the last conversation he had with his mother about it. “Truly Mama, who is my father? You owe me that much . . . Don’t you?” His tone was stern and icily. He remembered the prolonged silence that followed his question. He recollected the anger he had felt against her at that time, a bad kind of anger. Even as he thought about these things now, he could feel the raging storm which had mounted within him that day.

His mother’s cold and vacant eyes never left his sight. She just looked at him in dismay, as though she had already said all that could about the subject . . . Or that she already silenced *Sam’s father’s ghost* long time ago. In his mind’s eye, Sam visualized that moment again . . . His mother’s eyes changed, for they were not only fierce, but also filled with the ocean. Her chest was heaving up and down, up and down as though she had just finished running a marathon race. Then, her biddy eyes narrowed with rage, and her lips began to quiver. She bit her lower lip, sniffled a little and when she finally spoke, she simply said, “I don’t know how many times I have to tell you . . . Your father is Mr. Adika. If you can’t accept that truth, then I don’t know what else you want from me! Unless, of course, you and everyone else who thinks otherwise were there when you were being conceived?” her tone was calm and collected. She walked away without saying anything else. He had watched her march out of the Old Man’s compound until she vanished from his view. She did not look back. She did not say good-bye. She simply walked off. Sam’s eyes welled-up, once more, as he remembered these things. Her mother had maintained her story, but no one believed her. He also recollected rumors he had heard long time ago: that neighbors had pegged a man, whom they believed, bore some very striking resemblance to him—and he was not an affluent man . . . He was the village drunk and a thief. He had a nose that looked like his, that his forehead resembled his, that even his smile was similar to his, and that the twitching in his left eye was unmistakably like his. There was sufficient *smoke* to link Sam to this man whom he would rather have preferred not to call ‘Father.’ Tears welled in his eyes again as these things flashed his mind, just as they had done that day, but this time,

he closed that window permanently . . . ‘Some ghosts are best left untouched,’ he mumbled.

Then, he thought about his grandmother and the Old Man . . . He remembered how his grandmother had taken care of him. Whenever he became ill, it was she who took him to the hospital. Whenever he scratched or injured himself, the old lady cleaned his wounds. Whenever he was hungry, it was she who fed him. Suddenly, he felt tears sting the rims of his eyelids. Struggling to tame his cry, he realized how foolish he had been to have disparaged his benefactors. He also recollected the Old Man’s financial sacrifice to see him through school, ever giving, but asking nothing in return. He took this generosity for granted. How foolish he was those days to have not recognized these little trifles. He was certain now his grandparents had not been bad people. It was he who had been an imbecile. Suddenly, he felt guilty for the ill thoughts he had harbored against the Old Man over the years. He was such an ungrateful brute. Not once had he told the Old Man: ‘Thank you!’ Not once had he told his grandmother: ‘Thank you!’ Now he felt like a Grinch in the face of goodness. As he opened his eyes and drifted back to his pulsing present, he vowed come morning, he would seek his grandparents out simply to tell them: ‘Thank you!’ He would also take his wife with him and introduce her to them. It was not too late for that, even if he knew he could not turn back the tide of time to right all his wrongs.

Yes, Sam nearly lost everything, including himself. The game was over, and the bulls had won. He understood that fact. There were no more rains of disdain. The grass was dead and shall remain. That was a fact. He knew many hearts had known pain. That, too, was a fact. He knew many eyes had seen terrible things. That, too, was true. Yet, those very hearts, those very eyes, brave enough to hope, looked towards the future, a bright future and had forged a tough shell between them and their horrid past. And just as it is the nature of things, life must go on, no matter what; so must he!

